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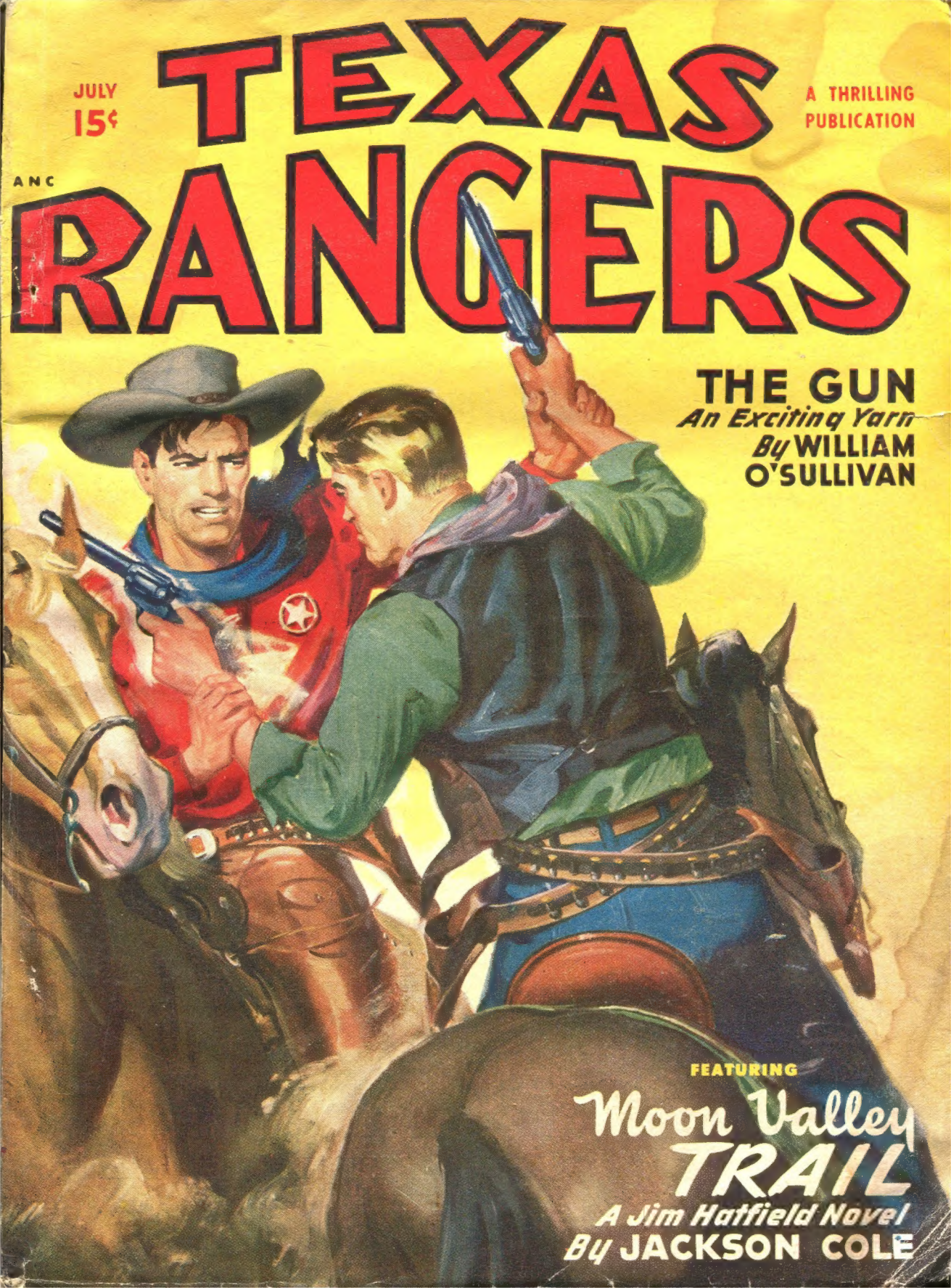

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# TEXAS RANGERS

VOLUME 39, NUMBER 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION JULY, 1950

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## Moon Valley Trail

### By Jackson Cole

A golden image on the body of a dead Mexican is the symbol that sends Texas Ranger Jim Hatfield through a maze of skulduggery to a gun-blazing climax as he probes a sinister desert mystery! 11

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HIYA, gals and galluses! So you're plumb bored by history, are you? Well, so was I, when I had to remember dates and things. But nowadays, I eat it up. Western history, specially. Here's an interesting sample:

About a half-century after Columbus discovered a small hunk of the New World, the ragged, hungry survivors of a party of Spanish explorers reached Mexico. They draggle-tailed into the town of Culiacan and figured that it was a good place for a rest-up.

While there, they picked up a wild yarn about a wondrous land to the north, where stood the Seven Cities of Cibola—seven cities built of gold! Not just pawnshop, 30-day guarantee junk, but solid, shining gold.

It sounded fishy. But the Spanish were suckers for a line like that, and had been ever since Pizarro hit the jackpot down in Peru, returning to Spain with shiploads of the precious metal.

### The Discoverer of Arizona

So one of the Spaniards, a Franciscan monk, Fray Marcos de Niza, decided to look into the thing. He called his Negro servant, Esteban—which is Stephen in Spanish. He said:

"Now look here, Steve. All this stuff about the seven golden cities may be pure bunk. On the other hand, quien sabe—who knows? It happens that I've got a sore foot from our long march. So here's what I want you to do. Go get the straight dope on this Cibola talk. Keep in touch with me, so I'll know how you're making out."

"Lawsy, boss, I can't write a line, you know that," said Steve.

"What of it?" said Fray Marcos. "You can put the idea over by sending me a wooden cross by messenger. If things aren't so hot, send a little cross, the size of your hand. If the prospects are okey, send a larger cross, savvy? That's all you have to do."

With some grub and a handful of Indian helpers, Steve set forth. And that was how this humble servant came to be another Columbus—the discoverer of Arizona.

### He Had Big Ideas

The trouble with Steve was, that once out of reach of his boss, he developed some big ideas of his own. In fact, he went hog-wild. He rigged himself up in gaudy clothes that he picked up here and there along the way and strutted along with a bright-painted rattle gourd that he pretended was a magic charm. He proceeded to impress the rural population with his importance and pretty soon had 300 awed followers, including a hand-picked harem of beautiful Indian gals.

So one day, back in Culiacan, while Fray Marcos sat nursing his game foot and unshucking a hot tamale, along came word from Steve. It was a wooden cross, not the size of a man's hand, but as big as the Indian runner who lugged it.

Fray Marcos was a pretty cool-headed citizen, but when he got that big cross, he went right up in the air. From the looks of it, Steve had found seventeen 24-carat cities. The good Fray immediately forgot all about his blistered heel and took off after glamor boy Steve.

Fray Marcos got pretty well up into Arizona when he got a second message. It was brought by a scared, bleeding Indian. Not a cross this time, but word that things weren't going so good with Stevie. The sad truth was, a bunch of Zuni Indians didn't swallow the fancy get-up and the phony luck charm. They'd given Steve the works and he was, at the moment, dark meat at a buzzard banquet.

### Mud and Rock

The Seven Cities of Cibola turned out to be a batch of mud and rock huts, populated

by Indians that didn't have a copper centavo, let alone gold. Fray Marcos, who had press-agented the deal back to the King of Spain before he left Culiacan, saw that he had to think up an alibi, but fast. He put in some time, saving souls among the Indians, then went back to Mexico to report that Esteban had given him a bum steer, which didn't help Fray Marcos any in Crown and Scepter circles.

Anyhow, Arizona was discovered. Other explorers came—priests, soldiers, trappers and hunters—but nothing much came of it for 300 years and more. Esteban did his botch job in 1539. In 1847, Arizona along with a vast region including all of California, New Mexico and parts of Colorado, Utah and Nevada fell into the hands of Uncle Sam, as aftermath of the Mexican War.

Washington, at that time, knew about as much about Arizona and the adjacent hinterlands as they did about Mars. They'd heard that it was desert. Desert meant sand, rattlesnakes and cactus. Nobody even rightly knew the boundary between this new annexation, "from Texas west" and old Mexico.

### Boundary Commission

So a Boundary Commission was appointed by United States and Mexico. Their job, survey a boundary from San Diego to El Paso. From the Pacific Ocean to the Rio Grande.

Sitting back there in an easy chair in Washington and looking at a wall map, it seemed very simple to survey a straight line. But the map didn't show the rugged mountains, the thorny jungles of chaparral, the tormenting heat or the bloodthirsty savages that lurked over much of that vast, waterless expanse.

So the border survey wasn't any cinch. The Commission managed to measure off the southern boundary of California. But by that time, Congress was wrapped up in other matters and clean forgot them. No appropriations had been passed to care for the survey party, not even to feed them. They tried to requisition supplies at far-scattered supply points, in the name of the government. Traders just gave them the horse laugh and said that their requisitions were no good.

For six years, things dragged along in this scandalous fashion. What was Arizona and

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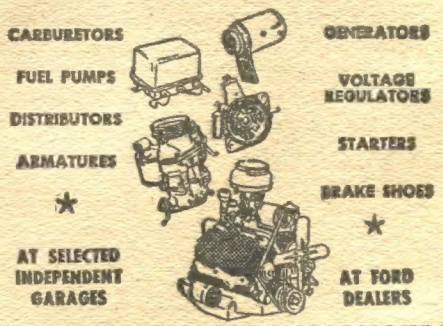


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what was Mexico was any man's guess. Past Yuma, at the Colorado River, the border meandered uncertainly along the Gila River, petering out completely before it reached El Paso. The Boundary Commission collapsed. A second one was organized.

### A Joy Ride for Politicos

Washington went to the other extreme this time. They dished out a whale of an appropriation. The second Boundary Commish became an extravagant joy-ride for a flock of political hangers-on. It hired a gang of bootmakers, tailors and the head of the Commission rode around in an Army ambulance, entertaining in grand style.

Rumors of delay, neglect, inefficiency, squabbling and plain graft finally drifted back to Washington. But it took many weeks to get messages back and forth then, in the 1850's.

Luckily, about this time a bunch of moneyed bigshots back East got hep to the idea that a transcontinental railroad through the desert country would be a good bet, to compete with the Union Pacific trunkline, far to the north. But they balked at that border survey along the Gila. The only practical right-of-way lay well to the south of the Gila.

### The Gadsden Purchase

A shrewd and far-seeing statesman named Gadsden, then U. S. Minister to Mexico, cooked up a deal to buy a slice of country and extend the border southward. He put it over. In 1853, United States bought 45,500 miles of that "no man's land" for ten million bucks. The border was established where it is today. The Southern Pacific started to lay track.

Some amazing facts about amazing Arizona came to be known in those years. The Sitgreaves Expedition, sent out by Congress to do a job of exploring, helped to decide on the southern route for the railroad when they sent back the report that some of northern Arizona was practically impassable because of a petrified forest! The expedition had a tough time working its way through the fallen, stonelike trunks on muleback.

How Washington bigwigs must have batted their eyes when they got that news!

Anyhow, the Gadsden Purchase of 1853 settled the border question. At the time,

Arizona was a part of New Mexico Territory. The whole she-bang was just an outlying part of Dona Ana County, New Mexico. As for law, it simply didn't exist, except for the saber-rattling authority that stemmed from a few small, scattered Army posts. And the Army had its hands full with hostile Indians, so couldn't be bothered with white renegades. Outlawry was rampant. An honest man's rights went only as far as he could shoot. If he missed, he was a dead duck. Arizona was a place that attracted robust characters only.

### Law and Order

The mess lasted only about three years. In 1856, Arizona Territory was formed. Law and order began to take shape. By 1912, Arizona became civilized enough to enter the Union as our youngest, toughest State.

By this time, it had dawned on Washington that Arizona wasn't just a sand desert, after all. The very name, Arizona, had become a by-word of hope for sick folks, because of its dry, healthful climate. Also, it contained one of the largest pine forests on the face of the earth. Also, there was mineral wealth—not only gold, but silver, copper and other metals —that made the Seven Cities of Cibola look like ten cents. There was grazing cropland of extraordinary fertility. There were scenic wonderlands and natural wonders that still sound like whoppers, such as the Sitgreaves Expedition sent in.

About one-sixth of Arizona today is Indian Reservation, and until very recent years nearly one-third of the population was Indians and alien Mexicans.

### "Pimeria Alta"

From times prehistoric, the Indians had found Arizona a mighty nice place to be. They weren't all murderous savages. The Pima people, one of the predominating groups, were happy, peaceful, prosperous farmers when the Spanish first came. The first name of Arizona was "Pimeria Alta."

Since the time of the prehistoric cliff-dwellers, cotton thrived on the rich, warm bottomlands, and those early, industrious people dyed and wove it into garments and other useful articles. Which makes it hard to believe that not until recent years did growers stumble onto the fact that long

*(Continued on page 93)*


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# MOON VALLEY TRAIL

## CHAPTER I

### *The Fatal Opals*

"HOLD it, horse!" Jim Hatfield snapped as Goldy, his great golden sorrel, shied so violently he almost unseated his tall rider. The Texas Ranger glanced down, saw the raised body and head of a sidewinder that had almost fanged the horse with his vicious lateral stroke.

Hatfield's hand flickered down and up. There was a wisp of smoke, and the crash of a report that sent the echoes flying back and forth among the buttes and chimney rocks. The up-

reared head suddenly vanished. The upper portion of the decapitated body thrashed and writhed.

Hatfield ejected the spent shell from his Colt and replaced it with a fresh cartridge. His hand paused halfway as he started to thrust the big gun back into its holster. He stared at the dying snake in mild surprise. The upper half of the body continued to jerk and quiver with lessening force. But the tail and lower half lay quite motionless on the hot sand.

"Why, the darn thing had a broken back!" he told Goldy. "I thought it was funny for it to be lying out here in the blazing sun. A rattler can't stand much hot sunlight—kills him in a hurry."

Inistinctively he glanced keenly about for a solution of the mystery. The hand that held the Colt tensed. From a clump of sage near what passed for a trail across the Tonto Desert, protruded a moccasin and a stretch of ragged velvet pantaloon.

Hatfield dismounted with lithe grace, still cautious. Anything could happen in this burned over stretch of hell, and usually did. He advanced toward the bush, under which he could now make out a shadowy form.

Abruptly, with an exclamation of pity, he holstered his gun and hurried forward. The ankle showing between moccasin and pantaloon was hideously swollen.

"Snake struck him and he stamped on it and busted its back," Hatfield muttered, pushing his way under the low branches of the sage. He saw now that the man who lay there was a Mexican. The face into which he peered was frightfully cadaverous—bones under a stretching of leathery dark skin. The body was emaciated. A glance told Hatfield that the man was very old. He was a rather grim-looking speciman and, Hatfield decided, was of almost pure Indian blood.

"Darn near starved," Hatfield muttered. "So weak he couldn't take the venom from even a pygmy rattlesnake. He had just about strength left, I reckon, to stamp on the spotted devil and bust its back before he keeled over and crawled under the sage to get away from the sun.

As Hatfield leaned near, the closed lids flickered, raised a trifle, showing a glint of black eyes.

"Anything I can do?" Hatfield asked in Spanish.

The shrunken lips of the dying man writhed forth a single word—

*"Agua!"*

HATFIELD'S own cracked and blackened lips tightened a little, but he did not hesitate. He got his canteen from the saddle pouch and let the last few drops it contained trickle into the Mexican's mouth. The old man swallowed slowly and painfully until the water was gone. Then he sank back with a deep sigh. Abruptly he looked up.

"All you got?" he asked, speaking a halting English.

Hatfield nodded. "Sorry, but that's all," he replied. "I'll pack you along with me till we find more."

The old Mexican shook his head. "You give all," he muttered in a cracked whisper. "I die. It was *bueno, muy bueno*—much good. But maybe you die too because you give all."

Hatfield smiled, and shrugged his broad shoulders.

*"Quien sabe*—who knows?" he replied. "Don't let it worry you, old-timer. We all have to go some day, when our time is up. No use bothering about it till it happens. Now I'm going to take you along with me. Maybe we can find a doctor to look after that leg. Nothing I can do for it—poison has already spread."

Again a negative shake of the white head.

"I die," the Mexican repeated, positively. "You give all. I give all, too."

A clawlike hand thrust inside the ragged shirt, fumbled about and came forth holding something. He thrust the object into Hatfield's hand. Hatfield mechanically grasped it. The object was of metal and astonishingly heavy for its size.

A single death-clouded word writhed past the Mexican's lips—

*"Metzli!"*

A choking gasp. Then, in a ready whisper—

# Jim Hatfield Probes a Secret of the Desert!

*"Valle de la Luna!"*

The Mexican tried desperately to speak again, striving to say more, but only a choking rattle came forth. His scrawny chest swelled, his body tensed, relaxed. The chest sank in, and did not rise again.

"Poor old feller," Hatfield muttered compassionately. "He's gone." His eyes raised to the brassy-blue sky where a black dot was already whirling and planing.

"And maybe he's not far ahead of me," he muttered, trying to wet his dry lips

JIM HATFIELD

with an equally dry tongue. His eyes dropped to what he held in his hand and he uttered an astonished exclamation.

The thing was a dull-yellow image about three inches in length by one and a half in thickness. Its weight told Hatfield it could be nothing but solid gold. A point of stone had been worked into the base and the stone showed a clean but weathered fracture. Evidently the image had been torn away from a stone pedestal or other support.

The face that surmounted the squat body of the image was fiendish in expression. Above the low forehead was fashioned a peculiar head-dress in the form of a crescent. The eyes were as large as Hatfield's fingertip, and acrawl with strange and vari-colored fires.

"Opals!" Hatfield muttered. "Mexican opals, sure as shootin'—the bad luck stones. Now what in blazes? *'Metzli,'* the old jigger said. Unless I'm remembering wrong, Metzli was the Aztec moon god. The particular deity of the miners and metal workers. What else was that he said—*Valle de la Luna*—Valley of the Moon. If this isn't the darndest thing!"

Shaking his head in bewilderment, he straightened up and turned around—to gaze squarely into the muzzle of a gun!

Behind the gun was a man, a lean, lanky man with a dark face and lashless looking eyes of pale gray. Absorbed as he had been in the dying Mexican and his singular bequest, even the keen ears of Jim Hatfield had not detected his stealthy approach across the soft sands.

"I'll take it, feller," he growled in a harsh, menacing voice.

"Take what?" Hatfield asked, sparring for time.

"The thing you got in your hand," said the other, "the image the old hellion give you. I'll take it."

The gun jutted forward threateningly as he spoke.

But the man a stern old Lieutenant of Rangers named the Lone Wolf was not an easy man to get the drop on.

"Okay, take it," Hatfield said, thrusting the image toward the gunman.

The other instinctively reached. The barrel of his gun wavered a trifle.

Hatfield's hand shot forward. The heavy lump of gold spun through the air and caught the other squarely between his pale eyes. The gun roared, but Hatfield was going sideways at the same instant. His own Colt fairly leaped from the holster.

But there was no need to use it. The gunman lay sprawled on the sand, completely out.

Hatfield instinctively stooped to recover the image. As he did so, something yelled through the space his body had occupied the instant before. The image grasped in his left hand, he whirled sideways again,

and swore angrily.

Riding toward him shooting and yelling, and not more than three hundred yards distant, were fully a dozen more men.

HATFIELD did not hesitate. He thrust the image into his pocket, holstered his gun and forked Goldy all in the same coordination of movement. Odds of twelve to one were a mite heavy for even Captain Bill McDowell's Lieutenant and aceman. He was sure that the old Commander of The Border Battalion would himself have felt that such close association with a band of degraded owlhoots would be contaminating, and would have proceeded to remove himself from their neighborhood as speedily as possible.

With lead hissing all around him, Goldy seemed thoroughly in accord with his master. He proceeded to go away from there and go away fast. Hatfield leaned low in the saddle and urged him on with voice and hand. He was not particularly worried, for shooting at such a distance, from the back of a racing horse, was little more than guesswork, and aside from a chance unlucky hit, he had little to fear. And he was confident that Goldy's great speed and endurance would quickly distance the pursuit.

Swiftly the great sorrel drew away from the wrathful pursuers. Bullets ceased to come close, and in another few minutes the firing ceased altogether. Hatfield straightened in the saddle and settled himself comfortably. Then for a second time he uttered a wrathful exclamation.

Ahead and to the right, swooping along on a slant that would cut the fugitive's trail, was another body of horsemen. Hatfield counted four. What a moment before had been but irritating, abruptly became deadly serious.

Instinctively, Hatfield veered to the left. A moment later he glanced back and saw that the pursuit had gained a little.

"Cut over enough to clear that bunch ahead, and the main outfit will catch up with me," he muttered. "They'll be riding the short leg of the triangle."

He gazed longingly ahead, to where, shadowy against the skyline, loomed dark, craggy hills slashed with canyons and draws. They were not so very far off, but the speeding horsemen riding down the long slant from the west were much nearer, and drawing closer with every racing stride.

Nearer loomed the hills, but the four hard riding horsemen had gained appreciably. Bullets began whining past again. The pursuers behind had cut his advantage by almost half. Hatfield glanced back at them, glanced ahead, and uttered an exclamation. Instinctively his hand tightened on the bridle.

Straight ahead, where the four horsemen were charging down a long slope, the ground abruptly fell away—fell away to a wide bench fifteen feet below, then plunged in a dizzy slant to the floor of a gloomy canyon that zig-zagged toward the eastern tip of the hills. To ride down that boulder strewn sag appeared to be nothing but madness. But Hatfield instantly made up his mind.

"You haven't got wings, horse, but you'd better grow them," he told Goldy. "Okay, feller, it's up to you."

But it was up to Hatfield first. The four horsemen reached the drop first, scant yards ahead of the racing horseman. Their guns blazed. But their horses were wild with excitement. They snorted and plunged, and before their riders could quiet them, Hatfield's voice rang out like a golden bugle call of sound—

"Trail, Goldy, trail!"

THE great sorrel shot forward in a soaring bound. Hatfield's gun flamed and thundered. Straight into the milling group charged the sorrel. There was a crackling roar of shots, a pandemonium of flying lead, plunging horses and yelling men as Goldy landed in the tangle like a thunderbolt.

Down went two horses, their riders cursing and screaming. A third man spun from his saddle as Hatfield's gun blazed right in his face. Goldy crashed into the fourth horse as he caromed sideways off the first two. Hatfield had a fleeting glimpse of a rage distorted face and two blazing dark eyes as horse and rider went to the ground in a sprawling tangle.

Over the lip soared Goldy, as if he actually had "growed" wings. He hit the bench, stumbled, floundered, regained his footing with catlike agility and went storming down the slope accompanied by a cloud of dust and an avalanche of loosened boulders. Hatfield swaying easily

in the saddle, kept his head up and encouraged him with voice and hand. Goldy snorted response and sped the faster.

On the lip above, the larger band of horsemen had joined their fellows. The big black-eyed man, apparently the leader of the bunch, cursed and raged at his mounted followers, profanely ordering them over the edge in pursuit of the Ranger. But the horses refused to take the jump and their riders were not particularly enthusiastic in urging them on.

Bullets hissed and crackled through the air, but Goldy was far down the slope and going like the wind. Nor did the boiling dust cloud that accompanied his progress make for accurate shooting. A moment later he hit the canyon floor with a clang of clashing irons and went speeding down the shadowy gorge.

Glancing over his shoulder, Hatfield saw that the horsemen were streaming purposefully northward along the canyon rim, at a fast pace. He faced to the front and urged Goldy to greater speed.

"Looks like they know just where they're going," he muttered. "Chances are there's an easy way into this crack, farther up. Well, they won't have much chance running us down. It'll be dark in a little while, and Goldy will hold his lead without any trouble. June along, horse, we got places to go. Looks like other gents have gone through here from time to time, too. Lots of hoof prints, nearly all heading south."

## CHAPTER II

### *Hell Town*

HATFIELD rode down the canyon in a very wrathful mood. He had not liked being chased like a sheep-killing coyote. "Sure wish I'd got a better look at that black-eyed jigger," he growled. "I've a prime notion he is the he-wolf of the pack. But about all I saw clear was his eyes. I wouldn't recognize him if I met him in the middle of the trail. Seemed sort of tall.

"It all comes from trying for a short-cut across that blasted stretch of desert," he told Goldy. "First we get plumb lost

The shrunken lips of the dying man writhed forth a single word—"Agua" (Chap. 1)

in a sand storm, then we come nigh to getting snake-bit, and then we tangle with a whole pack of sidewinders. Right now we're lost again. No way of telling where this darn crack through the hills leads to. Anyhow, though, it 'pears to head in the general direction we figured to go—south by a mite east."

A moment later he uttered a thankful exclamation. Directly ahead, gushing from under a cliff, was a spring of clear water. In a split second he and the sorrel were both downing the first decent drink they had had in nearly twenty-four hours.

Finally, with a long sigh of satisfaction, Hatfield sat back on his heels, fished the makin's from his pocket and began rolling a cigarette with the slim fingers of his left hand. From force of long habit, he studied his surroundings minutely, casting glances back the way they had come, although he had little fear of pursuit catching up with him.

"Chances are those jiggers got a skinful," he decided. "None of 'em 'peared to want to follow up when we went down the sag. And from the looks of this hole, there's no chance of anybody scooting on ahead and cutting us off. The walls are straight up and down, and we're already getting into the hills. Hope the darn thing doesn't turn out to be a box or we'll have a nice long ride back to somewhere we can get out. Let's see how much damage has been done."

The damage turned out to be slight. Hatfield found two holes in the crown of his hat, another through the brim. Still another passing slug had bored his shirt sleeve and drawn a few drops of blood from his arm as it burned the flesh. A fifth had nicked his chaps where they flared out from his holster. But otherwise he was untouched. Goldy hadn't lost a patch of hair.

Hatfield smoked in comfort for a few minutes, in the shade of the cliff overhang. Then he remembered the curious image that, it seemed, had started the shindig. He drew the thing from his pocket, hefted it and looked it over carefully. He shook his black head in a puzzled fashion.

"What in blazes is this all about?" he demanded of the image. "Were those sidewinders trying to run down that old Mexican for this thing? Looks sort of like it. They were scattered all over the section, like a brush combing bunch would be. And the one who snuk up on me and braced me sure knew just what he was after. But why? This thing is worth some dinero, all right. There's a few ounces of gold here, and the stones may be even more valuable than the metal. Hard to tell about that. Takes an expert to accurately appraise Mexican opals.

"But even if they're stones of the first water, there isn't enough value here to warrant a bunch of fifteen or sixteen taking a chance on that desert to run this thing down. Sure doesn't make sense. But to all appearances, this is what they were after, and they were willing to go in for a killing and risk eating lead themselves to get it."

His long, black-lashed eyes of a peculiar shade of green hardened as he thought of the men who had thrown lead at him.

"May have been a legitimate outfit after what they figured belonged to them," he mused, "but I don't think so. They had all the earmarks of an owlhoot bunch. I've a notion they'll bear a mite of investigating, if I ever get where I can do some investigating. Wonder if there is any tie-up with what Captain Bill sent me over here for?"

SPARSE grass grew on the banks of the little stream that flowed from the spring. Hatfield removed the bit from Goldy's mouth and allowed him to graze for a few minutes. While the horse was cropping grass, he sat down and drew a letter from his pocket, a letter he had received while attending to some routine Ranger business at the eastern arc of the Big Bend country.

A mite east of where you are now (Captain Bill wrote) is a cow and mining town called Sanders. I got a note from a fellow living in that section, a fellow named Walt Cowdry. I knew him pretty well back in the old days. He writes that they're having a heap of trouble with a bunch he calls Roma's Raiders. Chances are it will turn out to be just some sort of a petty widelooping outfit that can well be taken care of by the local authorities. But seeing as it's not far from where you are at present, suppose you amble over to Sanders for a look-see. Tell Cowdry hello for me when you see him. He was a 'good Injun' when him and me worked together for the old Slash K outfit. Understand he's gotten pretty well off since then. Writes his brand burn is Cross C with an overbit ear-mark.

Complying with Captain Bill's request, Hatfield had headed for where he had been told Sanders was located. To save time, he attempted to skirt a strip of arid desert with disastrous results. He knew, however, that he could not be far from the country for which he was headed.

It was gratefully cool in the canyon's depths, after the blazing glare of the desert, but Hatfield did not care to linger long by the spring. He hadn't forgotten the purposeful way the owlhoots had ridden north along the canyon rim. The sky was reddening with approaching sunset when he tightened his cinches and rode on down the canyon.

"You've filled up, after a fashion," he told Goldy, "but I'm so empty I'd boom like a drum if anybody hit me. June along, horse, let's see if we can find a place where folks eat something besides wind pudding."

On and on the canyon wound, through the hills, now, with the little stream, increased by several additional springs, purling through the center of the brush grown floor. The depths were shadowy and along the lofty rim played strange and glorious fires as the lower edge of the sun dipped beneath the western crags. Soon these died to a tremulous glow.

The strip of sky burned scarlet and primrose, softened to a dusty pink that paled to pearly gray then deepened again to violet. Needlepoints of flame that were the stars appeared as the violet changed in turn to purply-black.

Hatfield slowed Goldy's pace. He no longer had any fear of pursuit. Besides, it had become very dark in the narrow gorge and he didn't care to risk the sorrel's legs on the boulder strewn surface.

Another twenty minutes of cautious progress and the Lone Wolf exclaimed with relief. They had rounded a turn and before them, less than a mile distant lay a cluster of "fallen stars" glowing through the darkness. They could be no other than the lights of a town. Ten minutes more and Hatfield was conscious of a deep and monotonous humming that, as he proceeded, loudened to a grinding rumble.

"Stamp mills!" he exclaimed. "Big ones, too. Horse, I've a plumb notion we're coming to that town of Sanders we've been hunting for. We were told it was located in a canyon mouth. Uh-huh, can't be anything else. We got a break. The way we were going when that shindig started, we might have over-run it by miles."

Goldy, scenting the possibility of oats and a comfortable stall, quickened his pace.

SOON they were passing through the straggling outskirts of the town, which sat in the canyon mouth. The east wall of the gorge fairly shadowed the crooked main street, while the west wall fell away to give place to a vista of rolling rangeland with the granite claws of the hills extending forward to form canyons and gulches.

Farther westward, and to the south, darker shadows on the shadowy skyline, were mountains, which Hatfield knew must be the peaks of the Bullis Gap Range. And there to the southwest was owlhoot country of the worst sort. "Wet" cows came across the Rio Grande there, and smuggler trains and gents who found *manana* land too hot to hold them.

"And this pueblo is situated just about right to be a lay-over point for that kind," was the Lone Wolf's unerring diagnosis.

Past the shadowy bulk of the stamp mills, Hatfield rode. Then came long rows of cattle loading pens flanking a railroad siding. Further to the south, beyond the jutting bulge of the west canyon wall, gleamed the twin steel rails of the railroad main line, with a station squatting beside the tracks.

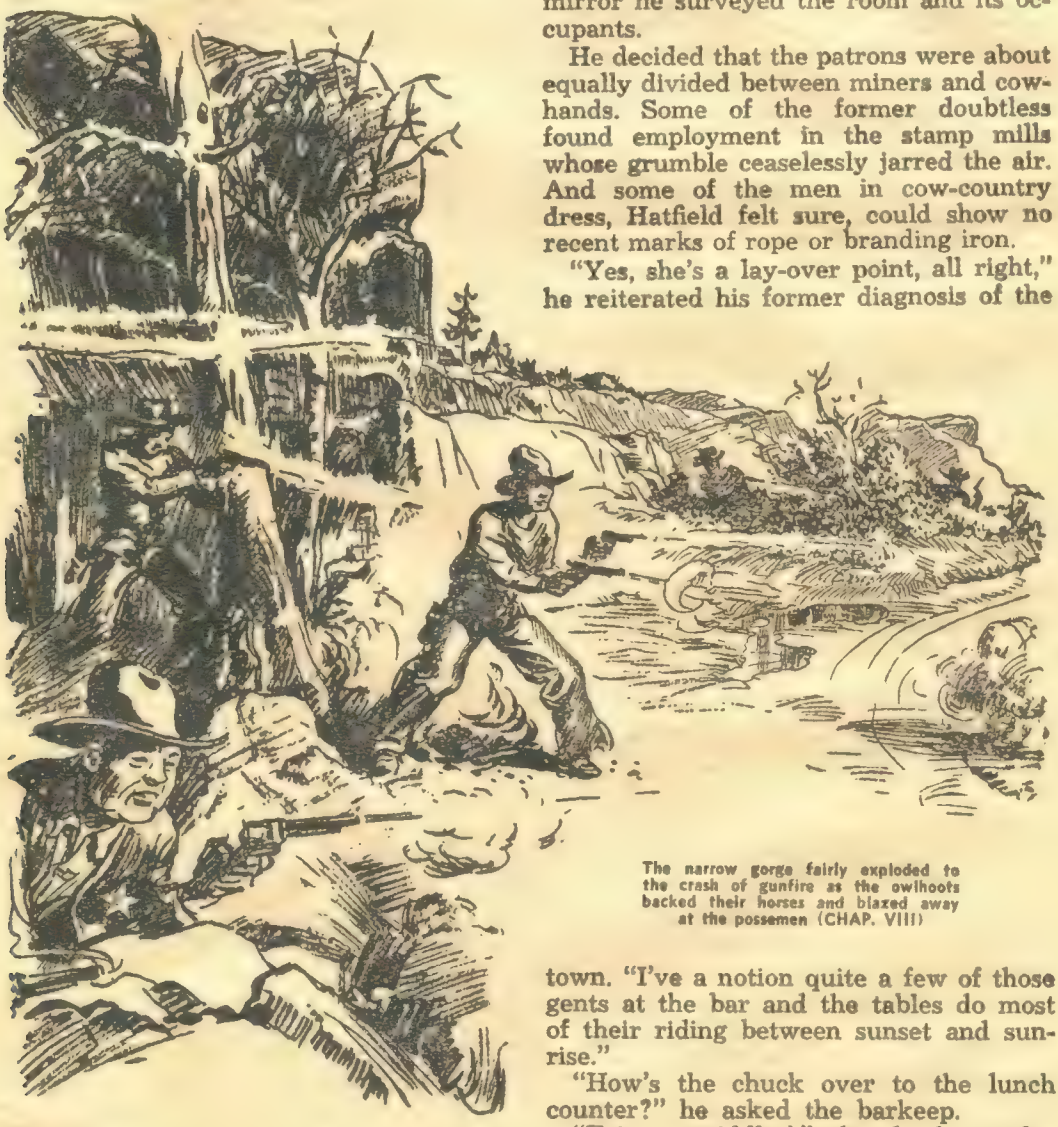
But between the stamp mills and the railroad was the heart of the town, a crooked main street lined with shacks, dobes and false fronts, with here and there a two-story "skyscraper" rising grandly above the common level. Lanterns hung on poles at the corners provided inadequate street lighting, which, however, was abetted by golden bars of radiance streaming through the windows of stores, saloons, dance halls and gambling places.

Long rows of hitchracks lined the board sidewalk, and Hatfield noted plenty of cow ponies tethered to the pegs. Evidently the town did considerable outside business.

Hatfield hitched Goldy at a convenient rack and pushed through the swinging doors of a saloon whose sign declared

prime food as well as liquid refreshment was available on the premises.

The big room was pretty well crowded and a babble of talk set the hanging lamps to flickering. Almost instantly, however, it died to a hum, then ceased altogether. As Hatfield approached the bar, he was conscious of eyes resting on him from every direction.



The narrow gorge fairly exploded to the crash of gunfire as the owlhoots backed their horses and blazed away at the possemen (CHAP. VIII)

"Whe-e-ew!" he whistled to himself. "Strangers sure get a prime going over in this pueblo."

Apparently oblivious of the rather unnerving reception, he unconcernedly ordered a drink, tossed it off and ordered another, which he sipped. The bartender served him in silence, then moved away to relieve the wants of an equally silent patron.

Gradually, however, the talk resumed, though Hatfield felt that those near him spoke in guarded tones. In the back bar mirror he surveyed the room and its occupants.

He decided that the patrons were about equally divided between miners and cowhands. Some of the former doubtless found employment in the stamp mills whose grumble ceaselessly jarred the air. And some of the men in cow-country dress, Hatfield felt sure, could show no recent marks of rope or branding iron.

"Yes, she's a lay-over point, all right," he reiterated his former diagnosis of the town. "I've a notion quite a few of those gents at the bar and the tables do most of their riding between sunset and sunrise."

"How's the chuck over to the lunch counter?" he asked the barkeep.

"Fair to middlin'," the drink juggler replied in cordial enough tones. "We aim to serve the best in town, and we don't have many complaints. Feller come in here the other day and ordered two fried

eggs, one fried on one side and one fried on the other. That started an argfyin' in the kitchen between the waiter and the cook, but the gent finally compromised on havin' 'em scrambled and 'lowed they was okay."

This bit of interesting information was accompanied by a frightful contortion of the barkeep's countenance, which, Hatfield deduced, was intended for a wink. He smiled, and the bartender moved off, chuckling.

Hatfield was about to seek the lunch counter and risk the argumentative cook and waiter, when abruptly the talk in the room fell flat again. He glanced around to ascertain the cause.

COMING through the door was a tall man who paused to look the room over, smiling thinly. His eyes, now slight-

ly narrowed, Hatfield noted were a very dark blue. His features were good, his mouth tight-lipped. After the instant of hesitation, he headed for the bar, walking with long, lithe strides and casting contemptuous glances from side to side. Hatfield noted his clothes were powdered with desert dust.

There was a vacant spot next to where Hatfield stood, and the new arrival occupied it. The bartender hurried to serve him, but poured the drink in silence. It seemed to Hatfield that his hand shook a little as he tipped the bottle over the glass.

The other downed his drink and called for another, which was likewise poured in silence.

This time, the conversation in the room was slower to resume, and it seemed to Hatfield it did not reach its former tone and freedom.

The man beside him seemed to sense this, also, for the sarcastic smile on his thin lips widened a little, and his darkly blue eyes narrowed a trifle more.

Abruptly he turned to face Hatfield. "Stranger here, aren't you?" he asked in a deep voice.

"Just landed," Hatfield admitted.

"I ain't," the other replied, adding with a bitter twist of his lips, "but I might as well be. Fact is, I reckon I shouldn't be talkin' to you. It won't do you any good hereabouts."

Hatfield glanced down at him. The other was a tall man, six feet and a little more, but he had to raise his gaze to meet the Lone Wolf's level green eyes.

"Feller, I choose my own company," the Ranger replied, "and I haven't heard myself asking you to move along."

The other stared, but the grin that followed the stare had nothing of contempt in it.

"Much obliged," he said. "My name's Kells, Hugh Kells."

Hatfield supplied his own name, and they shook hands. And it seemed to Hatfield that the hum of conversation again assumed a lower note.

"Have a drink?" Kells asked.

"Was just going to put on the nosebug, but I reckon I can stand another," Hatfield accepted. "Got my throat pretty well lined with desert dust today. Rode over from the west."

"West of the Tonto?" the other asked, incredulously. "You mean to say you crossed that section of flattened out hades at this time of the year."

"Reckon I did," Hatfield replied, adding with a smile that flashed his even teeth startlingly white in his bronzed face, "but I reckon I won't try it again."

"You were loco to try it once," the other said. "If a sand storm had caught up with you, you wouldn't be here tellin' me about it."

"One did," Hatfield replied, "but I got a pretty good horse and he pulled me through it."

"He must be a lulu," Kells declared with conviction.

"You live hereabouts?" Hatfield asked as they raised their glasses.

"Have for the past two years," admitted Kells.

"Maybe you may have heard of a gent named Cowdry, Walt Cowdry, then," Hatfield remarked. "A feller I know told me he knew him, just before I headed over in this direction. Feller said he owns a ranch —the Cross C—somewhere hereabouts. Figured I might look him up."

"Well, if you do, you'll take a longer, and maybe a hotter trip than you did across the Tonto Desert," Kells replied grimly.

"How's that?" Hatfield asked.

"Because he's dead and buried," Kells replied. "Old Walt Cowdry got hisself killed last week, drygulched from the brush."

## CHAPTER III

### *The Second Try*

IT WAS Hatfield's turn to stare. Before he could reply, the swinging doors suddenly banged open and an enormously fat man came charging in.

As the new arrival paused just inside the door, Hatfield noted that he had a wide-spreading walrus mustache, twinkling little gray eyes, a red button of a nose and pursed lips. On his sagging vest was pinned a big nickel badge that said "Sheriff" in no uncertain terms. Against his right thigh, a holstered gun hung in a very businesslike manner.

The sheriff glared about suspiciously. His eyes centered on Hatfield and he came waddling across to the bar.

"Where'd you come from?" he demanded, with a profane qualification as to the general region.

"Another place," Hatfield replied instantly.

"What's that?" barked the sheriff.

"Another place," Hatfield repeated. "You evidently got it figured I don't come from this place, so it must be from another place."

The sheriff turned purple and appeared to breathe with difficulty.

"Listen," he snorted, "I asked you a civil question and I expect a civil answer."

"Yes," Hatfield agreed mildly, "you asked a civil question, but you didn't ask it in a very civil way."

The sheriff seemed slightly taken aback.

"It's my business to ask questions," he growled. "For all I know, you might be Roma hisself."

"Gosh! that helps!" Kells broke in. "I figgered everybody around here thinks I am Roma."

The sheriff whirled on him.

"Nobody's accused you of bein' Roma," he retorted.

"No, not to my face," Kells replied grimly, "but there's talk been goin' around, and you know it, Sheriff Walsh."

"If you were more pertickler as to who you associate with, folks wouldn't be talkin'," the sheriff returned meaningly.

"Who's Roma?" Hatfield interrupted at this point.

"He's a blankety-blank owlhoot that had ought to be dancin' at the end of a rope, on nothing," declared the sheriff.

Hatfield turned to Kells.

"Blazes, feller," he remarked seriously. "Looks like you and I are sort of on a spot."

"Oh, shut up, dadblame you!" swore the sheriff. "There's too many lippy younkers showin' up here of late. Anybody might be Roma. I might be him myself, if I weighed a hundred pounds or so less and was twenty years younger, from all anybody's been able to find out about the hellion."

Hatfield chuckled. "Have a snort, Sheriff," he invited. "That is if you don't mind drinking with a couple of owlhoots." He smiled down at the irritated old peace officer, his sternly handsome face of a sudden wonderfully pleasing.

In spite of himself, the sheriff had to grin in return.

"Everybody's jumpy hereabouts of late," he explained apologetically. "Let a stranger a mite out of the ordinary show up, and somebody comes high-tailin' to tell me he figgers Roma's just rode into town. I wish the sidewinder would ride in, and give us a chance to line sights with him!"

"You don't know what he looks like, then?" Hatfield asked as the bartender poured.

"No," the sheriff admitted. "Nobody does. He shows here, and he shows there, wideloops a herd, holds up a stage, busts open a bank, and is gone like a jackrabbit into the brush. If he ain't the devil, he's his first cousin."

"A bunch can't hold up a stage or rob a bank without somebody getting a look at them," Hatfield objected.

"Roma don't usually leave no witnesses," the sheriff replied grimly. "And his bunch always operates masked.

Hatfield nodded, his eyes thoughtful.

"How many usually in his bunch?" he asked.

"The few times they been spotted, there's usually a dozen or more," said the sheriff, sucking the drops from his mustache.

Hatfield nodded again, looking even more thoughtful.

"I'm sort of in line for some chuck," he announced. "You gents care to join me?"

"Not a bad notion," Kells agreed.

"I ain't et for about an hour; reckon I can stand a helpin'," said the sheriff.

Curious glances were shot at the three as they sat down together to table, but no comments were made that Hatfield could catch.

HATFIELD had not eaten for twenty-four hours and he put away a splendid dinner, but the sheriff far exceeded his finest efforts. Hatfield couldn't but help wondering what he would have stowed away if he hadn't "et" for two hours.

Finally the sheriff shoved back his plate with a deep sigh.

"That's better," he said. "Ain't good to

go empty too long. Sort of makes a feller get on the prod too easy. Well, reckon I'd better amble back to the office. Roma is liable to ride in again any minute."

"Know a place where I can put up my horse and knock off a mite of shut-eye?" Hatfield asked.

"Turn to the right when you go out the door," said the sheriff. "Then right around the next corner is a livery stable that's okay. A Mexican runs it, a good man. He has a couple of rooms to rent, over the stalls, if you like to sleep close to your horse. They're clean, and no bugs, which is more than you can say for most of the flea sacks in this pueblo. Tell him I sent you."

With a nod, he rolled away from the table and out the door. Kells chuckled, and pinched out the butt of his cigarette.

"Walsh is okay," he said. "He don't give a hoot what anybody says or thinks. Makes up his own mind and sticks by it. A heap saltier than you'd think to look at him. Lots of muscle under that fat, and the way he can handle a gun is something to ride a long ways to see. If he ever does line sights with Roma, it'll be too bad for that owlhoot. Well, I got to be amblin' myself. Got a few miles to ride."

"Live in the neighborhood?" Hatfield asked.

"Sort of," Kells replied. "My little spread, the Tumbling K, is in a big wide canyon over to the east—prime range. It's called Moon Valley."

Hatfield's face did not change expression, but his eyes seemed to lighten a trifle till the green was almost gray.

"I'll be back in town tomorrow," Kells added as he got to his feet. "You figger on coilin' your twine hereabouts for a spell?"

"I may, if I can tie onto a job of riding or something," Hatfield replied.

Kells looked interested. "Know anything about minin'?" he asked suddenly.

"A little," Hatfield admitted.

"I'll be in here about noon tomorrow," Kells said. "Sure would like to have a mite of talk with you then, if you're still here."

"I'll be here," Hatfield said definitely.

"Okay, I'll see you then," Kells said With a nod he turned and crossed the room with lithe strides and vanished into the darkness. Hatfield rolled another cigarette and sat smoking thoughtfully.

"*'Valle de la Luna,'* were the last words that dying Mexican said," he mused. "And into plain Texan, that translates very nicely—Moon Valley. Now what in blazes am I tangled with, anyhow? Roma's Raiders! Sounds like a brush sliding wide-looping bunch. But it appears they're considerable more than that.

"Poor old Walt Cowdry. 'Pears he wasn't talking through his hat when he wrote that letter to Captain Bill. And the sheriff, who looks to be a capable old jigger, admits he's plumb up against it. Looks like I'm in for an interesting time in this section."

A smile of pleased anticipation quirked his rather wide mouth, as he dwelt on a situation that could well give even the Lone Wolf pause.

"I'm playing a great big hunch that the bunch who chased me today were the Roma's Raiders outfit," he continued his reflections. "If so, it 'pears I'm about the only jigger mavericking around who ever got a look at the hellions and lived to talk about it, judging from what the sheriff said. May be wrong, of course, but I figgered that big black-eyed gent was giving the orders. If so, he must be Roma. I wouldn't recognize him if I saw him, but I have got a notion of his general appearance. 'Peared to have black eyes, all right.

"But," he added thoughtfully a moment later, "dark blue eyes look black at times. Moon Valley! I wonder!"

He pinched out his cigarette and stood up, stretching his long arms above his head. The babble of talk did not lessen as he sauntered across the room to the door. Apparently association with Sheriff Walsh had dissipated any suspicion that might have been directed toward him when he first put in an appearance.

UNHITCHING Goldy, he walked to the corner and turned into an alley. The livery stable was situated but a few yards from its mouth. Light glowed through chinks in the heavy door. A knock brought an alert looking young Mexican to answer the summons.

"Sheriff said you could put up me and the cayuse tonight," Hatfield explained.

The Mexican smiled with a flash of white teeth.

"Sheriff Walsh is *bueno hombre,*" he said.

"Uh-huh, 'pears to be a good man, especially with a knife and fork," Hatfield agreed.

"One need not take shame to his own appetite when the Senor Walsh sits at table with him," the other chuckled. "Senor, I am Tomaso, at your service."

He opened the door wide. Hatfield led Goldy into the stable.

"The *caballo magnifico!*" exclaimed Tomaso, gazing with sparkling eyes at the sorrel. "We will place him in the stall here by the window, Senor. It is cooler there."

He reached out an unhesitating hand to Goldy's bridle. The sorrel shot him a questioning glance, then followed without protest.

"You've got a way with horses, all right, Tomaso," Hatfield said. "Old Goldy isn't much on letting strangers touch him. Okay, I'll let you look after him. You'll know what to do. And I can have a place to sleep, too?"

"The room at the head of the stairs, Senor. There also is the large window. I sleep at the far end of the hall, should you wish anything during the night. The bracket lamp on the wall burns all night, so should you wish to descend the stairs, you will not fall. And here is a key to the door, should you decide to leave for some purpose. I do not usually provide keys, but the amigo of the Senor Walsh, that is different."

Hatfield thanked the Mexican keeper and ascended to the room assigned him. It was small, opening onto a narrow hallway that was boarded off from the haymow in the rear, but it was spotlessly clean and the narrow bunk built against the wall looked comfortable. A curtained window opened onto the alley, through which blew a pleasantly cool breeze.

Tomaso lighted the wall lamp and with a courteous "*buenas noches, Senor,*" departed to seek his own rest.

Despite the wearying day he had undergone, Hatfield did not immediately go to bed. He drew off his boots, placed the one chair in the room beside the window and sat down. He rolled a cigarette and smoked for a while.

Then he sat with his elbows on the window sill, enjoying the cool breeze and gazing across the flat roof of a shack on the opposite side of the alley, toward where the lighting of the main street cast a dim glow against the cliff face beyond. The alley was dark save where a corner pole-lantern shot a feeble beam along the base of the opposite buildings.

After a while, Hatfield leaned back in his chair and reached for the makin's again. But his hand abruptly paused as it touched his shirt pocket. On the far side of the alley he had sensed, rather than seen, movment. An instant later a shadowy something outlined into the form of a man standing at the edge of the bar of faint radiance, apparently gazing upward at the open window. Another moment and a second shadowy form joined the first and also stood in a peering attitude.

As Hatfield watched, tense and alert, the two shadows drifted silently across the alley and disappeared in the gloom of the stable wall. To the ears of the rigid watcher above drifted a faint scratching and shuffling sound.

Hatfield eased out of his chair and crossed the room on silent feet. He gently opened the door and glided into the hallway, closing the door behind him.

THE hall was empty. The wall lamp, turned low, cast a faint glow across the stair head. Hatfield slipped along the wall and paused at the top step, peering and listening. An instant later he very nearly fell down the stair.

From the depths below knifed a scream, the vicious scream of an angry horse. It was echoed by a howl of pain that didn't come from a horse's throat. In the raging scream, Hatfield recognized Goldy's piercing note. He went down the steps three at a time.

A stream of fire gushed through the window beside the front stall. Hatfield felt the wind of the passing bullet, heard it thud against the wall beside him as the gun roared. His hand streaked to his holster. He blazed three shots at the window square, aiming high lest he strike the horse. An answering slug whined past. Goldy screamed again, more angrily than before. Hatfield heard a curse, and the pad of running feet. He leaped to the door, fumbled frantically with the lock.

It took precious seconds to get the door unlocked. He flung it open, dodging back

in the same move. From across the alley came another bullet that missed him by scant inches. Both his guns let go with a rattling crash, raking the alley back and forth. He paused, thumbs hooked over the hammers, and listened. He thought he heard a scuffling and scraping on the far side of the alley, but he could see nothing. He waited a moment, then streaked across the open space, weaving and ducking.

No more gunfire answered the move. He flattened against the wall of the shack opposite the stable and listened. Then he groped his way cautiously along the wall.

Almost immediately he came to a narrow opening between two buildings. He peered into it and could see a glow of light flowing across a vacant lot. Nobody was in sight. H tried to edge into the opening, but his broad shoulders and deep chest couldn't quite make it.

"Must have been a pair of thin jiggers if they went through here," he muttered, "and I don't see where else they could have gone to get out of sight so fast."

He turned around, holstering his guns. From the dark cavern of the stable came an ominous double click. Hatfield found himself staring into the enormous twin muzzles of a ten-gauge shotgun.

"The hands raise!" said a familiar voice.

## CHAPTER IV

### *Man of Steel*

HATFIELD called, "Hold it, Tomaso! Everything's under control. Put that scattergun down before you blow over a house."

"Ah, it is you, Senor," replied Tomaso, stepping into view. "What happened? It sounded as if all the devils of *Infierno* were loose on holiday."

"Somebody tried to climb in the window over there," Hatfield told him. "I reckon Goldy nipped him, judging from the way he yelled."

"So!" growled Tomaso. "They would try to steal the caballo! I wish I could have brought the *escopeta* into play."

"Lucky you didn't," Hatfield replied, with conviction. "You'd have wrecked half the town with that cannon. It had ought to be on wheels."

Men were peering cautiously down the alley from the street. A moment later Sheriff Walsh waddled into view, puffing like a freight engine.

"Where's the body?" he demanded.

"Isn't any," Hatfield told him cheerfully. "They got away."

"Too bad," said the sheriff. "There'd ought to be two or three, from all that shootin'. You woke up the whole town. Horse thieves, eh? Gettin' so nothin' is safe hereabouts. Get a look at 'em?"

Hatfield shook his head. "Keep your eyes skun for a jigger short a hunk of meat," he advised the sheriff. "I've a notion my horse left teeth marks on him."

"Pity he hadn't got him by the neck," snorted the sheriff. "Well, I think I'll go eat and then get back to bed."

"A good notion," Hatfield agreed. "I'm going to do the same—the second part, anyhow."

"Better come and eat," urged the sheriff. "You'll need to keep your strength up if you hang around in this section. All right, you fellers, bust it up. Everything's quiet."

He stamped back up the alley, herding the crowd before him. Hatfield and Tomaso returned to the stable and shut and locked the door.

"Tomorrow I bar that window with iron," declared Tomaso. "Had I not better sit up and keep watch with the *escopeta?*"

"Oh, they won't come back again tonight," Hatfield replied with conviction. "Let's go to bed."

"Keeps me busy cleaning guns," he growled as he sat down on the bunk and went to work on his Colts. "Well, those hellions didn't waste any time. And they sure are anxious to get hold of that devil-faced hunk of gold. This thing just doesn't make sense. That's what they were after, all right, not the horse. They spotted my window and figured to sneak up on me while I was asleep. Might have done it, too, if it wasn't for Goldy. Me being awake and spotting them was just a bit of luck."

THERE was no doubt in his mind but that the marauding pair were members of the gang he had the run-in with on the desert. Doubtless they had slid

down the canyon, as he suspected they would to reach the town in the canyon mouth. And they would know that Hatfield would of necessity end up in Sanders by way of the canyon.

"But that doesn't explain how they knew right where to find me," he told himself grimly as he holstered his guns and prepared for bed.

Hatfield slept late the following morning. Sunlight was pouring through the window when he awoke. After a shave and a sluice in the trough of cold water in the back of the stable, he ambled out in search of some breakfast. On the corner he met Sheriff Walsh.

"Howdy?" said the sheriff. "Any more trouble? Nope? Well, then, come on and let's eat."

While they were waiting for the food to prepare, Hugh Kells entered the saloon, glanced about, and walked over to their table.

"Set and eat," invited the sheriff. "I done had my breakfast, but I didn't want Hatfield to be lonesome, so I'm havin' a mite of a snack with him. Better make that five eggs for me, waiter, and a double helpin' of ham."

While they ate, Hatfield carefully studied Kells. He certainly did not act or appear like a man who had attempted murder not twelve hours before and was now sitting at table with his intended victim. But he was the only person other than the sheriff who knew for a certainty where Hatfield intended spending the night.

"Of course," the Lone Wolf mused, "some jigger might have overheard what the sheriff said to me, although nobody was standing close to the table at the time. Also, it wasn't impossible that I was tailed to the livery stable. After all I haven't a thing on him. A big jigger with his clothes covered with desert dust and with dark blue eyes that could easily be mistaken for black.

"But that isn't enough to really fasten suspicion on a feller. Wouldn't be surprised if there are quite a few men in the section who could answer that description, fairly well. We'll just wait and see which way the pickle squirts."

Sheriff Walsh finished his ham and eggs first. "Got a chore to do," he said, and lumbered out. Hatfield and Kells rolled cigarettes and sat smoking in silence, which the latter finally broke.

"How'd you like to ride out to my place with me?" he suggested. Hatfield considered. The offer had certain attractions, and just as definite drawbacks. He reflected, however, that Kells would hardly lead him into a trap with the whole town knowing they had ridden off together. Sheriff Walsh would be asking questions, did he, Hatfield, not appear again, questions that would be hard to answer.

"Okay," he agreed. "Reckon it isn't a bad notion. Nothing to do right now."

"I want to talk to you," Kells elaborated, "and want to show you something that may interest you. All set? Let's go."

Hatfield got his horse. They rode out of town, circled the canyon wall and headed east. To the south was rangeland, rolling toward the Rio Grande. To the west the hills sent out long granite claws with narrow, grass grown valleys between them. To the east, the vista was much the same. The wide canyons were

[*Turn page*]

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grass grown and dotted with chaparral. Far beyond, Hatfield could see where the hills petered out to the east to give way to more rolling prairie.

"A good looking country," he observed to Kells.

"Yes," replied the other. "Fine cow-country, though a mite hard to work. Plenty of minerals in the hills, too. Over to the west are half a dozen paying mines. They have their stamps in Sanders."

THEY had covered perhaps half of the miles Kells said was the distance to his ranchhouse, when they observed a horseman riding toward them at a swift pace. As he drew nearer, Hatfield saw that he was a young man, slender with the steely slenderness of an unsheathed rapier blade, about six feet tall and finely formed.

His face reminded Hatfield of a medallion he had once seen of the Roman Emperor Tiberius Caesar. There was the dark hair curling over the broad forehead, the large well opened eyes of cold gray, the powerful arched nose, the disdainful mouth. It was a handsome face, arrogant, prideful, sure of itself.

As he drew nearer, the rider slowed his big black to a walk. He reined in, his mount at a slant, all but blocking the trail. The cold eyes flickered from Kells to Hatfield, looked him up and down. Kells pulled up and so did Hatfield, within arm's length of the newcomer, who apparently dismissed him from his mind and centered his attention on Kells.

"So you're bringin' in double-holster men to do your work for you, Kells?" he remarked in tones that dripped contempt.

Kells flushed slightly, but when he spoke, his voice was quiet.

"I notice you pack two guns, Cowdry," he remarked.

"But I don't use 'em to shoot folks in the back!" Cowdry blazed.

Kells' hand flashed to his holster. But Cowdry's draw was like the flicker of sunbeam on a wave crest. Jim Hatfield, lunging forward, caught his wrist in the split second of time vouchsafed him, jerking it up with a sideways wrench that spun the gun from Cowdry's hand. Cowdry instantly drew with his left, but again Hatfield was there first.

And this time the Lone Wolf meant business. Cowdry screamed in agony as his wrist bones were ground together as by the jaws of an iron vice. Sweat popped out on his face, sickly white under the tan. The second gun dropped from his nerveless fingers.

"A—a little more and you'll break the left one!" he panted. "If you do—I'll—I'll kill you!"

"Would be considerable of a chore with both your arms in good shape," Hatfield told him, easing his grip a trifle. "Behave if I turn you loose?"

"Y-yes, dang you!" Cowdry gasped. "Let go!"

Hatfield released him. Cowdry glared, his face twisted with rage, and nursed his aching wrists.

"I don't know what this is all about," Hatfield said, "but I never saw a shorthorn killing do anything much good. And you spoke plumb out of turn, feller. Nobody brought me in here, and nobody's moving me out till I'm ready to trail my rope. And any gun slinging I do will be on my own account. Ready to go, Kells?"

Wordless, Kells moved his horse forward in unison with Hatfield's. The Lone Wolf did not look back, but Kells did.

"Don't think for a minute *he* ain't plumb capable of shootin' in the back," he warned grimly.

"He won't do much gun pointing for a few minutes yet," Hatfield replied confidently.

Kells shook his head. "Reckon you're right," he agreed. "Feller, I'd sure hate to have you get your hands around my neck!"

Hatfield smiled slightly, and changed the subject.

"What was the feller on the prod so for?" he asked.

"HE believes I killed his uncle, Walt Cowdry," adding bitterly, "and so do a lot more folks, I reckon. You see, Walt Cowdry and me had some trouble. Last week Walt Cowdry was killed, as I told you last night. Found shot in the back, in the mouth of Moon Valley. Nobody accused me of doin' him in, but I know what folks are thinkin'.

"Young Bern Cowdry has done considerable talkin', I know, but I let it pass, till today. This was the first time he ever braced me to my face. Reckon

I'd have got mine today if you hadn't been along. He's plumb pizen with a gun, and mean as a teased snake."

"'Peared a trifle ringey," Hatfield admitted. What he did not mention to Kells was that, to all appearances, Cowdry had deliberately tried to taunt the older man into reaching.

"And he knew Kells wouldn't have a chance," Hatfield told himself. "Say, this is a nice section, all right!"

For some minutes they rode in silence. When Hatfield finally spoke, his voice was casual.

"What did you and Walt Cowdry have trouble over?" he asked.

Kells seemed to hesitate, shooting a sideways glance at the Ranger.

"Tell you about that later," he replied.

Hatfield nodded, and did not pursue the subject. He felt that Kells would talk when he was ready, and not before.

A little later they rounded a bend and Kells pointed ahead.

"There's Moon Valley," he said.

From the slantwise view of it, Hatfield could see that the valley was really but a wide canyon walled by high cliffs, and appeared pretty heavily brush grown. In fact, nothing much could be made of the valley because of the stand of tall chaparral choking its mouth.

Another half mile, and a broad and well traveled trail showed running through the chaparral. They turned into this trail and Hatfield heard a familiar grinding, rumbling sound.

"What in blazes?" he exclaimed. "A stamp mill!"

"That's right," Kells replied. "I stamp my own ore."

They rode swiftly up the trail. Suddenly the chaparral belt ended and the broad expanse of Moon Valley lay before them.

The canyon was excellently grass grown for as far as Hatfield could see. It was dotted with groves and bristles of growth. There were plenty of cows in sight. A stream of water ran down one side. The canyon appeared to box at a distance of perhaps ten miles to the north.

"A good looking range," he remarked to Kells. "And you 'pear to be doing plenty of other business, too."

A few hundred yards ahead, and near the west wall of the canyon was the stamp mill. The air vibrated to the rumble of the huge steel pestles doing their ceaseless dance that ground the ore into a watery paste, from which the precious metal would be extracted by the amalgam process.

The mill was not large, but the building that housed it was well constructed and new. Hatfield could see the arch of the mine tunnel that pierced the canyon wall, from which a cart laden with ore was just appearing.

Some distance beyond the mill was a ranchhouse, evidently much older than the mine buildings. Its site was good, in a grove of burr oaks, and a barn and corral and a few smaller buildings were in good repair.

"Yes, this is the Tumbling K, and over there," said Kells, "is the reason for my row with Walt Cowdry."

Hatfield stared. Kells had gestured toward neither mine, mill nor ranchhouse. He was pointing to a complacent looking black pig rooting around at the edge of the chaparral.

## CHAPTER V

### *Pocket Pig*

KELLS chuckled. "Yes," he said, "that darn old boar is to blame for everything. But I'll start at the beginning.

"Walt Cowdry owned just about all of this section, from over here on east and around to the north where the hills peter out. He held a heap more land than he had any use for. So when I came back to this country and wanted to set up in business for myself, he sold me Moon Valley, at a very reasonable price, and enough cows to start up with. That was about a year back.

"Well, I like pork chops, and right after I moved in and got going, I bought that boar and a few sows and turned 'em loose here to make out on the mesquite beans and so forth."

Hatfield nodded. "I see," he remarked, beginning to get the drift of what was coming.

"Uh-huh," Kells continued. "Less than

two weeks later, it happened. Last night you told me you know something about mining. Well, then you know that hogs are plumb good pocket miners. They root around the bushes and turn up little piles of dirt. Then along comes a rain and washes the piles down and exposes the gold, if there happens to be any around, sometimes right over a pocket. Well, that's just what happened. That old curly-tail rooted up a pile not over far from the cliff face. A rain came and washed the dirt down, and exposed a nice hunk of gold bearin' quartz. I'd had some experience with minin' over in California, while I was wandering around, and I knew right off that hunk wasn't glacier drift or water float. I knew it had been busted loose from a parent body, perhaps by a stroke of lightnin', or by cracking brought about by frost and thaws. Anyhow, there it was."

"So you started hunting for the source," Hatfield interpolated.

"That's right," admitted Kells. "I started huntin'. The logical place to look, of course, was the cliff face. The vein was there. Not strange that it had never been hit on before. There must have been a tremendous upheaval here, millions of years back, and those cliffs were thrust up.

"There are two distinct rock formations. The outer one is not gold bearing quartz. The second layer is quartz. Somehow or other a section of the outer rock sluffed off, a very narrow section. I'd say freezing water seepin' into the cracks durin' the years was the cause. Anyhow, back in that narrow cleft was the outcroppin' of the vein.

"Nacherly I did some careful investigatin'. I decided the vein was worth working. It was. It ain't any Mother Lode, but I've been gettin' metal in payin' quantities. I figger if I knew more about the business, I'd do a heap better.

"I borrowed money on the spread and on the prospective output of the mine, built the stamp mill and went to work. I'll admit I'm runnin' pretty close to the ragged edge, and if I can't do a mite better, I may have trouble when my notes fall due, but I was always purty good on takin' chances—that's how I got my stake to buy the spread, poker winnin's and so on."

"A nice layout, anyhow," Hatfield said with approval.

Kells nodded. "And I'd hate to lose it," he said. "But to come to Walt Cowdry. When Cowdry heard about my gold strike, he pawed sod for fair. You see, that darn pig twirled his loop right after I moved in. I hadn't been here even a month. Cowdry right off accused me of knowin' the gold ledge was there all the time, and flim-flammin' him out of a valuable property.

"I couldn't convince him any different. I privately offered to cut him in on the mine—equal shares—but he was the sort that when he got on the prod, he wouldn't listen to anything. Called me about everything he could lay his hand to. I took it, 'cause I knew he felt he was right. He never got over it.

"Got worse as time went on, in fact. About ten days ago he met me in town, cut loose for fair, and actually pulled his gun on me. I turned my back on him and walked away, with him yellin' at me to stand and fight and swearin' he'd get me sooner or later."

Kells paused to roll and light a cigarette, his eyes somber.

"Then," he concluded, "two days after our rukus in town, Walt Cowdry's body was found right out there at the mouth of Moon Valley. He'd been shot in the back."

JIM HATFIELD nodded thoughtfully. "Sort of put you on a spot," he agreed. "Did Cowdry have any enemies?"

"Not that anybody appeared to know about," Kells admitted. "Of course, there's Roma's Raiders. They've been raisin' hell and shovin' a chunk under the corner in this section for the past eight or nine months. Sheriff Walsh brought that up, and I've a notion quite a few other folks agreed with him. But there are plenty of others who are mighty suspicious of me. It's even been talked some that I might be Roma hisself. Nobody knows for sure what he looks like, and he started operatin' not so long after I came back here. You know how that sort of talk builds up. Young Bern Cowdry is plumb certain I did in his uncle, and says so."

"Did Bern Cowdry inherit his uncle's property" Hatfield asked.

Kells shook his head. "Nope," he replied. "Walt Cowdry left a daughter, and nacherly she came into everything. Bern's father was Walt Cowdry's older brother by a couple of years. He—got killed in Arizona a little less than a year ago. That's how young Bern came to live with his uncle."

Kells' momentary hesitation when speaking of Walt Cowdry's brother's death was not lost on Hatfield. He wondered why, but did not comment or question at the moment.

"And now," continued Kells, "comes what I wanted to talk to you about. You say you know somethin' about minin'?"

Hatfield nodded.

"Much?" Kells persisted.

"Considerable," Hatfield conceded. He did not see fit, at the moment, to tell Kells that before he joined up with the Rangers he had had three years in a famous college of enginering, that he had never lost interest in the subject and had in the years that followed kept up his studies, and had more than once put his knowledge to good use in the course of his Ranger activities.

"I know mighty little about it," Kells admitted. "I worked around mines in California and got the hang of how it was done, but when it comes to real knowledge of the business, I just ain't there. I can't help but feel that if I knowed more, the mine would be doin' better. It did quite well at first, but of late it hasn't been doin' near so well. I can't figger it, but also I can't figger what to do about it.

"What I want to ask you, will you take over here and run things for me. I'll pay you considerable more than a chore of ridin' will. I know what that is, and a feller never gets very far at forty-per and found. I got my start after I got away from a rope and brandin' iron. What do you say?"

Hatfield did not speak for a moment. "Suppose we look things over first," he suggested. "Then I'll talk to you, tell you what I think."

"Fine!" exclaimed Kells. "We'll do that before we eat, if it's okay with you." He called a wrangler to take care of the horses.

First they gave the stamp mill a once-over. Hatfield decided it was a good two-stamp mill with a capacity sufficient to handle the output of the mine, for the present, at least. The mill workers seemed to know their business. They regarded Hatfield curiously, and the Lone Wolf noted that there was a drawing together of heads in low-voiced conversation after he passed a group.

The engine room and the boiler that provided power for the steam drills also proved satisfactory. Then they provided themselves with cap lights and entered the mine tunnel.

As they progressed along the bore, Hatfield examined the side walls minutely and with interest. As he did so, his black brows drew together until the concentration furrow was deep between them, a sure sign the Lone Wolf was doing some hard thinking.

FINALLY they reached the end of the bore, where the drills chattered, sledges thudded and the scrape of loading shovels echoed from the walls. A number of drill men and other workers were busy there.

Hatfield examined the cutting without comment, watched the progress of the drilling for a while, selected specimens of the ore being brought down and scrutinized them intently.

As in the mill, he noticed a drawing together of heads and low voiced observations.

"Let's go eat," he abruptly said to Kells. "I'll talk with you outside."

At the comfortably furnished ranch-house, an old Mexican cook set a good meal before them. Kells talked about the ranch and the mine, but Hatfield was mostly silent, apparently deep in thought. After they had finished eating, they adjourned to the living room for a smoke.

"Well?" Kells asked at length. "What do you say? Goin' to tie up with me?"

Hatfield let the full force of his long green eyes rest on the other's face for a moment.

"Yes," he said, "under a condition."

"What's that?"

"Under the condition that I am in full charge, absolutely and without reservation, to do whatever I see fit, to issue any orders I feel are necessary. If you countermand even one order that I give, I'm through."

KELLS stared at him, slightly bewildered. The steady green eyes did not waver. The mine owner instinctively realized that Hatfield meant just what he said, no more, no less. He also sensed a rising conviction within himself that this tall, level-eyed cowboy knew what he was talking about.

"Done!" he exclaimed. "From now on, everybody is takin' orders from you, includin' myself."

"Funny," he added with a chuckle, "I ain't knowed you twenty-four hours, and here I am puttin' my whole business in your hands. You're a strange sort of feller, Hatfield. I felt that last night when Sheriff Walsh took to you like he did. Walsh don't usually like anybody over much, or anything else he can't eat. I've a notion most everybody you meet takes to yuh."

"Not quite," Hatfield smiled. "All right, let's go."

He stood up, hitched his cartridge belts a trifle higher. His face had suddenly set in bleak lines and Kells noticed that his strangely colored eyes had changed. No longer were they the green of a summer sea under sunny skies. Now they were the color of that same sea under winter's lowering storm clouds, a cold and smoky gray. Kells abruptly felt funny along his backbone, he couldn't say why.

"The mine first," Hatfield said as they left the house. "We'll stop at the mill later."

With long, lithe strides he led the way along the tunnel, standing aside from time to time to let mule carts laden with ore rumble past. They reached the head of the bore. Kell's shout called the workers from their tasks.

"Boys," he said, "this is Mr. Hatfield. He's in charge here from now on, absolutely. Whatever he says goes."

Hatfield gazed at the ring of curious faces for a moment.

"Who's in charge of the drillers here?" he asked abruptly.

A big hulking man with an enormous spread of shoulders and long, hairy arms stepped forward. He had bristling red hair, truculent dark eyes, and a stubble of reddish beard.

"I'm running things here," he growled in surly tones.

"That so?" Hatfield asked. "Well, just what is the notion of making the cut partly through the casing rock—rock that has about as much metal content as a grindstone?"

The big fellow glared. "You tryin' to tell me my business?" he rumbled menacingly.

"Exactly," Hatfield replied. "Either you don't know your business, or you're deliberately pulling something. Which is it—ignorance or slick-ironing?"

The driller boss flushed scarlet. His hair seemed to bristle. His eyes glared. With a roar of rage he rushed, his huge fists swinging.

Hatfield hit him, left and right. He went down fast and flat. With another yell he bounded to his feet, blood spurting from his cut lips. Again he rushed, striking out with terrific force.

Hatfield weaved aside, and hit him again with both hands. Again he went down, gasping and floundering.

But he could take it. He scrambled to his feet, a trifle more slowly this time, and again he rushed. Hatfield sidestepped, but his foot came down on a fragment of rock and for an instant he staggered, half off balance. The big man's fist found its mark, thudding against the Ranger's jaw. Hatfield reeled back against the side wall, and with a yell of triumph, the driller rushed in for the kill.

He met a straight right that stopped him in mid stride. As he sagged on his feet, Hatfield's left lashed out with every ounce of his two hundred pounds of bone and muscle behind it. The smack against the driller's jaw was like to that of a butcher's cleaver on a side of meat.

THE big fellow seemed to grow wings. He flew through the air, great limbs revolving, landed on his back, and stayed there. Hatfield rubbed his tingling knuckles and spoke, his voice quiet, unhurried.

"Pack him outside and throw a bucket of water over him," he directed. "When he gets his senses back, tell him not to be around when I come out or he'll get a real working over. Now who is there here that's capable of taking charge of the drilling.

There was a moment of hesitation, then a wizened little old fellow stepped for-

ward. His faded blue eyes met Hatfield's without flinching.

"Reckon I can do it," he said, "so long as I'm workin' for somebody who knows what he's doin' and gives straight orders. My name's Tom Barnes."

"Okay, Barnes," Hatfield instantly replied. "You are in charge of the work here." He turned to Kells.

"What were you paying that horned toad they're packing out?" he asked.

Kells named the sum.

Hatfield nodded. "Barnes gets ten dollars more per," he said. "All right, Barnes, how would you change the cutting from here on?"

The old man reacted without hesitation, making his suggestions precisely and to the point. Hatfield nodded with satisfaction.

"I won't need to tell you much," he said. "Okay, Mr. Barnes, get your drills going. I'll check with you tomorrow. Come on, Kells, let's look the mill over again. We're not needed here."

As they headed down the tunnel, the bewildered owner turned to Hatfield.

"What in blazes is it all about?" he demanded.

"I don't know," Hatfield replied grimly. "For some reason or other, that head driller was veering the cutting away from the lode. Half the rock they were bringing down was absolutely worthless."

"But wouldn't the others know that?" Kells asked.

"Not necessarily," Hatfield replied. "They are drillers and laborers, not miners in the real sense of the word. I'm pretty sure that old feller, Barnes, had caught on, from the way he answered me. And I think the mill men were puzzled about the kind of rock they were getting for the stamps. But the casing and the gangue—the metal bearing rock—is almost identical in appearance, and this is, comparatively speaking, low-grade ore that does not have an outstanding metal veining or flecking. I'd give most of the workers the benefit of the doubt. Barnes, I'm pretty sure, caught on, as I said, but figured it was best for him to keep his mouth shut. You can't blame him. That head driller was a pretty salty proposition."

"I know all the men were scairt of him," Kells agreed. "But you handled him like he was a scrub calf."

"He was awkward on his feet and lost his temper," Hatfield deprecated. "Glad he didn't get his arms around me."

"Uh-huh," Kells remarked dryly, "so am I. You and me might have been explainin' a killin' to Sheriff Walsh. I ain't forgot what you did to Bern Cowdry when you took hold of him. And Bern ain't no pushover for anybody.

"But why in blazes was Purdy, the head driller, doin' what he was?" Kells demanded in perplexity.

Hatfield shrugged. "For some reason he wanted to cut your production down," he replied. "What that reason was and what was back of it are something else again. I've a notion your next mill clean-up will show quite a rise in metal."

Just then they met the four returning laborers who had been assigned the chore of packing Purdy's unconscious form to the outside.

"He come to before we made it to the tunnel mouth," one of them explained. "He cussed somethin' awful, but he kept on goin'."

"Reckon he's headed down the valley by now," Kells chuckled. "He kept a horse in the barn and rode to town most every night. The other men sleep in a bunkhouse I built for 'em back of the house, and eat there. They usually stay here at night except on paydays. Then I have 'em druv over to Sanders for a bust. They all seem to be purty good men."

Hatfield nodded, but reserved decision. He strongly suspected that at least one of the mill workers was in cahoots with Purdy.

HATFIELD spent the remainder of the day going over assay reports, production sheets and other details with Kells. "I don't see any reason why you won't be doing as well from now on as you did the first few months of operations," he told the owner. "You evidently showed a fair profit on your investment at first, but of late I'd say you haven't done much more than break even."

"That's right," Kells agreed.

Hatfield pondered a moment.

"Anybody tried to buy you out here?" he asked suddenly.

"Why, no," Kells replied. "Reckon

everybody hereabouts knows I wouldn't sell. Everybody knows I'm most interested in makin' Moon Valley a payin' cow ranch, and makin' a home of the place. If the mine should fail up tomorrow, I wouldn't be pertickler bothered, so long as I could hold on to the spread."

"But suppose the mine did peter out and you couldn't meet your notes, or even the interest?" Hatfield asked.

"Well," said Kells, "in that case, I reckon the bank at Sanders would find itself in the cow business."

"I see," Hatfield nodded thoughtfully.

Hatfield was even more thoughtful as he sat in his room in the ranchhouse that night, before going to bed.

"It's like everything else that's been happening since I landed in this section," he thought. "It just doesn't make sense. From all appearances, somebody hired that slick-iron Purdy to cut production at the mine. It was being done in a smart way, too. He could have veered the cutting still more and left the vein altogether.

"But that was liable to cause somebody to get suspicious. Kells, or the bank, which has an interest in the success or failure of the mine, might have hired a mining engineer to try and relocate the lost vein. And then the jig would have been up. But a slow and steady decrease in production is something else again. It is a logical occurrence in workings like this one. Would indicate a gradual petering out of the lode. That has happened in lots of places. They have had a good chance to get away with it.

"But why? Why should anybody be so anxious to put Kells out of business? To get hold of the mine? There is where it doesn't make sense. The ore is low-grade ore, with little chance of ever being anything else. It will make Kells some money, but it won't make him rich. Why should anybody cook up a dangerous scheme like that, one that would send somebody to the penitentiary if the facts came to light, just to get control of such a property?

"No, it sure doesn't make sense, but there it is. And who is back of it? Purdy certainly wasn't acting on his own. He hasn't got that kind of brains. Just a stupid hired hand, and the sort ready to doublecross anybody for small pay. Perhaps I'd have done better to have kept him on for a spell. Might have learned something."

He drew the tiny opal-eyed image from his pocket and studied it long and earnestly. The demoniac little face seemed to leer at him derisively.

"This thing is the key to the explanation, or I'm a heap mistaken," he mused. "But what that can be, I've not the least notion. Well, it doesn't much matter, anyhow. My business here now is to run down Roma's Raiders, whoever they may be."

The night was quite warm, so Hatfield put out the light and sat for a while beside the open window. He was thinking of turning in when his keen ears caught the sound of stealthy footsteps on the ground below. He leaned forward, peering into the darkness. A moment later he was almost sure he saw a shadowy figure cross the open space between the ranchhouse and the mill.

The figure did not reappear, however, and there was no further sound. After some minutes of watching and listening, Hatfield was about to dismiss the whole occurrence as a figment of his imagination. But as he turned from the window to prepare for bed, he saw a flicker of light in the direction of the mill. It reappeared, stronger and brighter, and abruptly became a reddish glow rising and spreading.

An instant later, Hatfield was pounding down the stairs, roaring *"fire"* at the top of his voice.

## CHAPTER VI

### *Cold-decked*

ALARMED shouts sounded from the workers' quarters in the rear of the ranchhouse. Answering yells came from the bunkhouse by the corral. Men came pouring forth in all stages of undress.

"Water!" Hatfield thundered at them. "The mill's afire."

He led the rush to the building, crashed open the door and leaped inside.

The fire was burning briskly in a far corner, crackling the oil soaked floor

boards, leaping up the tinder-dry wall.

With buckets, tubs and anything that came to hand, the workers attacked the flames. A line was formed to the nearby creek and the containers passed from hand to hand.

Hatfield and Kells and two of the cowhands fought the flames with the water the bucket line passed them in a continuous stream of containers, sloshing it against the burning wall, stamping out the spreading smoulders on the floor.

For minutes it was touch and go, for a brisk wind blowing up the valley fanned the fire and sent it leaping and roaring toward the roof.

Gradually, however, they got the flames under control. The whole end wall of the mill was blackened and blistered by the time the last ember was drowned out.

"How did you come to spot it, Hatfield?" Kells asked, wiping his grimy face.

"Just good luck," the Ranger replied. "Was standing by the open window and just getting ready to go to bed when I saw it flicker up."

"Well, if you hadn't, we would have lost the mill," Kells declared with conviction. "If she'd gotten just a mite more of a start there would have been no stoppin' it, with this wind blowin'. Much obliged, feller."

"Don't thank me," Hatfield chuckled. "Think I want to find myself out of a job?"

Kells glanced around, to insure that there was no spark still smouldering.

"Reckon some careless jigger dropped a burnin' cigarette," he growled. "If these fellers had ever got caught in a grass fire out on the range, they'd be more careful how they throw butts around."

Hatfield said nothing, but he had his own very definite opinion as to how the fire started.

The following morning, the identity of the mysterious night prowler Hatfield saw was pretty well established. Also, Hatfield's suspicion that Purdy must have had a sidekick in the mill working with him was confirmed.

"Shelton, the foreman, ain't here this mornin'," a mill hand informed Kells. "He must have slid out durin' the night. His bed wasn't slept in."

Hatfield was not particularly surprised. "Purdy couldn't very well have gotten by with what he was doing unless he had somebody working with him in the mill," he told Kells. "And it was sort of logical to think that somebody would be the mill foreman. I didn't say anything to you yesterday, because I didn't want to chance casting suspicion on a jigger who might be plumb innocent."

Briefly, he told Kells of what he had seen and heard from the window of his room just before he spotted the fire.

"That was Shelton, all right," he concluded. "The sidewinder made a last try to make trouble before he trailed his rope."

"You figger he started the fire?"

"Of course, who else! I knew last night it had been deliberately set. The minute I busted into the mill I smelt burning oil. The whole floor and wall in that corner was drenched with it. Check up and you'll find a couple of containers are missing."

Kells swore viciously. "I'd sure like to line sights with that firebug," he concluded. "But why did he do it? To get even for us firin' Purdy?"

"He would have put you on a bad spot, right now, if the mill had been destroyed." Hatfield remarked. "Somebody is trying mighty hard to put you out of business, Kells."

"But why?" asked the bewildered owner.

"That's what I would like to know," Hatfield replied. "But it sure looks like somebody is almighty anxious to have you fail up. Got any bad enemies that you know of?"

KELLS shook his head. "Not unless you'd call Bern Cowdry an enemy," he replied. "Cowdry ain't got no use for me, but he don't strike me as the sort that would do a thing like settin' fire to the mill to even up."

Hatfield had already formed a like opinion.

"Was Cowdry unfriendly to you before his uncle got cashed in" he asked.

"No," Kells replied positively. "We weren't friends, but there was never any hard feelings before Walt Cowdry was drygulched. Bern was always civil enough when we happened to meet, which wasn't over often."

"That would appear to let Bern Cowdry out of it," Hatfield said. "For Purdy had

been pulling his stunt for the past three months, or so. The production sheets show that plainly."

Several busy days followed. First of all, Hatfield gave careful attention to the stamp mill and its employees. The operation of resolving the gold from the ore was a tedious and intricate process. Two tall, upright rods of iron, as large as a man's ankle, and heavily shod with a mass of steel and iron at their lower ends, were framed together like a gate. These rods rose and fell, one after the other, in a ponderous dance in an iron box called a battery. Each stamp weighed six hundred pounds.

The ore was shovelled into the battery and the ceaseless dance of the stamps pulverized the rock to powder. A stream of water that trickled into the battery turned it into a creamy paste. The minute particles were driven through a fine wire screen that fitted close around the battery, and were washed into great tubs warmed by super-heated steam. These were the amalgamating pans.

The mass of pulp in the pans was kept constantly stirred by revolving mullers. A quantity of quicksilver was kept always in the battery, and this seized some of the liberated particles of gold and held onto them. Quicksilver was shaken in a fine shower into the pans, also, about every half hour, through a buckskin sack. Quantities of coarse salt and sulphate of copper were added from time to time to assist in the amalgamation by destroying base metals which coated the gold and would not let it unite with the quicksilver.

Streams of muddy water flowed always from the pans and were carried off in broad wooden troughs to the outside. Atoms of gold floated on the top of the water. Coarse blankets were laid in the troughs to catch them, and little riffles charged with quicksilver were placed here and there across the troughs also.

The riffles had to be cleaned and the blankets washed out every evening, to get the accumulations of metal.

Many times during the day a little of the pulp was scooped from the pans and washed in a horn spoon till nothing was left in the spoon but some little dull globules of quicksilver in the bottom. If they were too soft and yielding, salt of sulphate of copper was added to the pan. If the globules were crisp to the touch and would retain a dent, they had collected all the gold they could seize and hold. Which meant the pans needed a fresh charge of quicksilver.

At the end of the week the machinery was stopped for the clean-up. The pulp was taken from the pans and batteries and the mud and other rubbish washed away. The accumulated mass of quicksilver with its imprisoned gold was molded into heavy, compact balls.

Then the balls were placed in an iron retort that had a pipe leading from it to a container of water. A roasting heat was applied to the retort. The quicksilver turned to vapor, escaped through the pipe into the container and the water turned the vapor back into quicksilver once more, which could be used over in the process of amalgamation.

The retort was opened and the lump of practically pure gold was taken out. This was melted up and made into a brick by pouring it into an iron mold.

All these intricacies required careful supervision and each was vulnerable to sabotage of one sort or another.

But before two days had passed, Hatfield was satisfied that no more of the workers in the mill had been implicated in the plot.

"Us fellers had a mighty good notion something was going on," the stamp man he elevated to the position of foreman confided. "We knew we were gettin' rock for the batteries that had no business there. But Purdy and Shelton were cold propositions to go up against. So we just decided to lay low and hope that things would work out. And they did."

The work in the mine was also progressing satisfactorily. Old Tom Barnes proved capable and trustworthy, and in possession of a fund of mining lore that steadily improved production.

"A straight cut ain't the thing for this lode," he told Hatfield. "She's a zig-zag vein. So I figger to make lateral cuts along with the main bore, if it's okay with you."

"Go to it,' Hatfield told him. "I see you know your business. I'll check with you from time to time, and I'll try and improve the ventilating system. Those lateral cuts will be hot and dusty if we don't

take care of them. We don't want any accidents."

"We won't have any," Barnes declared. "I'm keepin' a close eye on everything that goes on."

"There'll be bonuses for increased production," Hatfield promised. "You can pass the word along."

Barnes departed to take care of the chore, grinning with pleasure.

Hatfield decided on a trip to town to arrange for equipment needed to install the improved ventilation system he promised Barnes, the head driller.

"You handle it," Kells told him. "You know all about it, and I don't. Hutchinson's general store will place the order for you and make delivery."

Hatfield reached Sanders without incident. After completing his business at the general store, he dropped in on Sheriff Walsh for a visit. He found the sheriff in a very bad temper.

"The Bar B lost a hundred cows night before last," Walsh explained. "Old Man Brady is fit to be hogtied. This is gettin' serious, Hatfield. This is cow-country, minin' is just a side line, and a thing like this can plumb ruin the section if it keeps up. We ain't got any big spreads hereabouts and the boys can't stand such losses. It'll mean goin' out of business for them if it ain't stopped."

"Where did they go?" Hatfield asked.

"South to the River and across," replied the sheriff. "There's a prime market for wet cows the other side of the Rio Grande right now. I trailed 'em to the river, but they had too much start."

"And you figure the outfit you call Roma's Raiders is responsible?"

"Of course," growled the sheriff. "Who else?"

"How did they get to be called Roma's Raiders?" Hatfield asked. "Sort of an unusual sounding name."

"A few years back there was a Mexican owlhoot named Roma who kicked up a lot of trouble hereabouts," said the sheriff. "But the Rangers killed him and busted up his outfit. When this new bunch started operatin', somebody said it must be Roma's Raiders back, and the name stuck, that's all."

"And now everything is Roma's Raid-

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ers," Hatfield remarked thoughtfully "No matter what happens, Roma's Raiders get blamed for it, even though the chores may be pulled by other gangs sneakin' in to take advantage of opportunity. Something happens and folks say 'Roma's Raiders', which makes it easier for the other bunches, and harder for the peace officer."

"Reckon you're right there," agreed the sheriff. "Did you tie onto a job with Kells?"

Hatfield explained the work he was doing for Kells.

"Glad to hear it," said the sheriff. "Kells is a first-rate cowman, but I figger he don't know much about minin'. He needs somebody who does know to handle things for him. I always liked Kells, no matter what folks have been sayin' about him of late."

"You don't think he had anything to do with Walt Cowdry's death, then?" Hatfield asked.

"No," Walsh replied. "Kells ain't the sort to go shootin' anyone in the back, I'll bet my last peso on that. He's purty handy with a gun, and he ain't got any yaller around his backbone. He took a heap from Walt Cowdry, but there's a good reason for that, as I reckon you'll find out sooner or later."

HATFIELD asked the sheriff if he could recommend a mill hand and a driller, casually mentioning that Purdy and Shelton had left Kells' employ.

"Reckon I can find you a couple of rock busters," Walsh admitted. "There's usually one or two hangin' around. Them hardrock men quit jobs whenever the notion strikes 'em, and take up with some other outfit. I remember Purdy. A first-rate rock man but a hard proposition. He was in quite a few rukuses here in town, till I threatened to throw him in the calaboose for a spell. Then he cooled down a mite.

He used to play poker a lot with young Bern Cowdry and a few other jiggers. 'Peared to be a purty good card player. Usually won. Cowdry most always loses, but stays hopeful. I don't recall much about Shelton. Reckon he might have been one of the poker players if he happened to be a sidekick of Purdy's, which I reckon he was, seein' that they quit together. Nope, I ain't seen either of 'em durin' the past few days."

Hatfield thanked the sheriff and departed to the Ace-Full for a bite to eat before riding back to the Tumbling K.

As he pushed through the swinging doors, his glance fell on young Bern Cowdry sitting at a nearby table where a poker game was in progress. Cowdry's face was flushed, his eyes glowing. His hands twitched as he manipulated the cards.

"A gambling man," Hatfield mused, "the sort that goes for cards like some folks go for red-eye. A regular passion with him, I'd say. And that sort usually loses. Too impatient and reckless. Have to be in every pot, no matter what kind of a hand they hold."

Cowdry glanced up at that moment and met the Ranger's eyes. His face tightened, his hands tensed, the fingers spreading out claw-like on the green cloth.

Hatfield stood perfectly still, waiting.

But Cowdry apparently thought better of anything he had in mind. With a swift glare, he dropped his eyes to the cards again and went on playing as if nothing had happened. Hatfield walked to the lunch counter and placed his order.

He caught a glint of Cowdry's eyes aimed in his direction as he left the saloon a little later. But the young cowman did not rise from the table or make any other overt move.

Hatfield rode back to the Tumbling K very thoughtful, and very watchful.

## CHAPTER VII

### *The Trap*

SEVERAL days later, Kells announced his intention of riding to town. Certain supplies needed to be replenished and he wished to draw money from the bank to fill the pay envelopes that would be distributed the next day. He asked Hatfield to accompany him.

As they rode to town, Kells talked about matters pertaining to the mine and the ranch, but Hatfield was mostly silent, giving careful attention to the terrain over which they rode. No movement of twig or branch escaped his observation. He studied the actions of birds on the

wing and of little animals in the brush. His gaze constantly roved over the thickets and hillsides. He did not expect trouble, but he was taking no chances. Too many sinister happenings had taken place since his arrival in the section.

"Sanders will howl tomorrow," Kells chuckled. "It's payday for all the mines. Most of the spreads pay off, too, so everybody can take part in the bust. Sheriff Walsh won't even have time to eat, and the temper he'll be in! Interfere with Tom's eatin' and he ain't fit to live with."

As they entered the main street, they saw a buckboard standing beside the railroad station. On the seat was a girl. Hatfield noticed that as Kell's eyes rested on her, he flushed and grew ill at ease.

The girl spotted them immediately and waved a little sun-golden hand.

"Come on over, Hugh," she called.

Hesitantly, Kells turned his horse. He and Hatfield dismounted beside the buckboard. The girl leaped lightly to the ground to greet them.

"Mary, this is Jim Hatfield, my new mine engineer, and a mighty good friend," Kells introduced. "Jim, this is Mary Cowdry."

Mary Cowdry was not very big, except for her eyes, which were astonishingly so and a deep violet-blue in color. She had a sweetly formed red mouth, a slightly tip-tilted little nose with a freckle or two delicately powdering the bridge. There was a wholesome outdoor look about her and her smile was engaging. But there was a somber shadow in the blue eyes that Hatfield felt did not belong there. She shook hands frankly, and smiled up at him.

And when she looked at Kells, and Kells returned the look, abruptly a number of things that had been puzzling Hatfield were made plain, such as Kells' reluctance to tangle with old Walt Cowdry, the girl's father.

'I haven't seen you for ages, Hugh," she said reproachfully.

Kells flushed miserably. "Mary," he replied, "you know what folks have been sayin'," he muttered.

"Yes, I know," the girl replied. "but nobody could make me believe for a moment that you had anything to do with—with Dad's death. You know me better than that, Hugh. At least you ought to."

"But then there's Bern," Kells pointed out. "He's on the prod against me for fair."

Mary Cowdry's round little white chin suddenly tilted upward and in a very firm fashion.

"I hate to have to say it, but I own the Cross C now, and I have all the say as to what is done and what isn't," she replied. "If Bern doesn't like my—my friends, he can go back to Arizona. Oh, he's a good cowman, all right, and has been a lot of help to me and has been most kind and considerate since—since what happened. But he needn't think he's telling me what to do or deciding with whom I shall associate."

"It makes me feel a heap better to hear you say that, Mary," Kells said gratefully, "but I don't want to make trouble for you. You've had enough as it is. Why are you in town?"

"I'm here to meet a cook who is supposed to arrive on the noon train," the girl replied. "Charley Lake of the Bradded L over by Rio, has two fine Chinese working in his kitchen. He doesn't really need but one, so he's letting me have the other. The first of last week, old Miguel left. You remember Miguel, the Mexican Bern brought up from Angelo.

"He was a good cook, but for some reason or other he cleared out all of a sudden, without giving notice or saying a word to anybody. He just left. Bern rode around to every place he thought he might be, but couldn't find a sign of him. Stuffy Jones took over the kitchen and has nearly poisoned all of us. I had to take over myself. The boys were all threatening to quit."

"Stuffy has notions when it comes to cookin'," Kells chuckled.

"He certainly has—some notions," the girl replied disgustedly. "Sauerkraut cooked in coffee! That was the last straw."

"No idea why Miguel took a notion to trail his twine?"

"None at all," Mary answered. "He just left. I can't understand it. He always seemed perfectly contented."

JIM HATFIELD suddenly played a hunch. "Ma'am," he said, "what sort of a looking jigger was Miguel? I met an old Mexican out on the desert on my way

to this section. I've a notion he was headed for a long trip. Wonder if he could have been your cook?"

"Why, Miguel was an old man," the girl described. "A little wizened old man. Wasn't anything much to him but bones with skin stretched over them. Looked half starved all the time, though he seemed healthy enough. His hair was almost white."

"Sure just about fits the feller I saw," Hatfield replied gravely.

"Did he say where he was going?" the girl asked.

Hatfield shook his head. "Nope, he didn't say. Fact is, I've a notion he didn't really know himself."

"All men are that way," Mary Cowdry declared with the experience and conviction of twenty-one. "They just go riding off with nothing particular in mind, just to be going somewhere."

She shot a challenging glance at Kells as she spoke. The big fellow grinned a trifle sheepishly but apparently decided he was better off not to argue the point. He wisely changed the subject.

"That darn train is late, nearly half an hour," he observed. "She's usually right on the button."

Other citizens appeared to be of the same opinion. A considerable crowd had gathered about the station, craning necks to gaze along the twin ribbons of steel that stretched into the east until they appeared to merge into one before curving out of sight around a bulge.

Among those present were Sheriff Walsh and two of his deputies. The sheriff appeared ill at ease and was constantly looking at his watch between glances shot eastward. He waved to Kells and Hatfield but did not offer to join them.

"Sheriff Tom is waitin' to guard the mines' payday money to the bank," Kells observed. "They have a big payroll over to the west and almost always the dinero is sent in from Rio the day before. That's what Walsh is here for, all right. He wouldn't have Jasper and Gaunt with him like that if he was just hangin' around to watch the train come in."

Another ten minutes passed, with the parallel ribbons of steel stretching empty into the east.

"Here she comes!" Kells suddenly exclaimed. "Look at her smoke!"

Around the distant curve bulged a bouncing black dot with a dark plume rolling back behind it. It rapidly increased in size. A moment later came, thin with distance, a long, frantic sounding whistle note, followed by a series of short toots.

"Look at her come!" chuckled Kells. "She's makin' up time for fair."

"Why," exclaimed Mary Cowdry, "that isn't the train. That's just an engine by itself."

Hatfield had already noted the fact. His blackbrows drew together, his eyes narrowed a trifle as he saw that the pilot was smashed to kindling wood, the boiler front cracked and battered.

On came the racing locomotive, whistle blaring, exhaust thundering. It roared up to the station and halted with a screeching of brakes. While the engine was still in motion, a blue-clad figure dropped from the cab.

"The payroll money!" howled the conductor. "They got it! They shot the messenger and blowed the safe and high-tailed. The express car is off the iron. We cleared the stuff they'd piled on the track and cut the engine loose and high-balled for town."

A wild hubbub followed. Sheriff Walsh, by strident bellowing, got something like order.

"Who did it?" he shouted. "Where'd it happen? Where'd they go?"

"It was Roma and his bunch, who else?" howled the conductor. "They blocked the track on that big curve over east of the hills. They headed north by west."

"Are you plumb loco?" bawled the sheriff. "There's no place to go that way. A goat can't climb them cliffs, and north of the hills, to the west, is that dad-dratted desert. You sure they didn't go east or south?"

"You think my eyes are goin' back on me" shouted the conductor, in injured tones. "I had a company examination last month. They went north, veerin' west around the hills. We watched 'em out of sight. They were sure siftin' sand. Ain't you goin' after 'em?"

The sheriff swore till the air crackled. "They got better than an hour's start already," he said. "What chance I got to pick up their trail and foller it before

dark Is the messenger dead?"

"Sure he's dead," snorted the conductor. "They drilled him dead center. Put a hole in the baggagemaster's arm, too. They blowed that safe clean through the roof, and peppered the coaches with lead till everybody was layin' on the floor. There was a dozen of 'em."

"Masked?"

"Of course they wore masks. Roma's bunch always wears masks."

## CHAPTER VIII

### *The Long Hunch*

THE sheriff swore again, in helpless fury. Citizens crowded around with advice that tended but to increase his rage. Jim Hatfield strode through the crowd, towering over those around him. He took the sheriff by the arm and drew him aside.

"Walsh," he said, "are you game to play a long hunch?"

"I'm game to play anything," growled the sheriff. "What you talkin' about?"

"Just this," Hatfield replied. "Get a posse together and head up Sanders Canyon. I got a prime hunch the hellions will head back to town by way of the canyon. If they do, you got a good chance to loop the lot of them."

The sheriff stared incredulously. "Now you done gone loco," he declared with conviction.

"Listen," Hatfield urged. "I had a run-in with a bunch the day I came to this section, across the Tonto. They chased me into the canyon. I went down over a bench and a sag where they were scairt to follow me. As soon as I was out of range, they turned and went high-tailing north along the canyon rim, like they knew just where they were going.

"I figured they were heading for a place where they could ride into the canyon. I noticed plenty of hoof marks in that canyon, nearly all of them leading south. And I'd swear the bunch that jumped me was Roma's outfit. If they can get into the canyon by circling to the north, it would be plumb simple for them to slip into town by ones and twos, after it gets dark."

Sheriff Walsh tugged his mustache viciously. He glared at Hatfield, and got the full force of the Lone Wolf's steady eyes in return. He tugged again, rumbled in his throat.

"By gosh," he exclaimed, at length, "for all I know you may be Roma hisself, but just the same I can't help feelin' you might have somethin' there. Will you go along as a special?"

"Sure," Hatfield replied. "Be glad to. And so will Kells. With your two deputies and four or five more straight shooting gents, we'll be all set."

"Let's go!" yelped the sheriff. "We got nothin' to lose but a mite of ridin', and if you happen to be right—well, you sure won't lose nothin' by it if I'm able ever to do for you. Come on!"

The sheriff quickly chose his men from the swarm of volunteers. In less than twenty minutes the posse thundered up the canyon, followed by the remarks of the citizenry, most of them derisive and skeptical.

"If this don't work out, I'll be laughed plumb out of town," the sheriff confided to Hatfield.

"I'm playing a hunch," the Ranger returned, "and I've a mighty good notion it's a straight one. I've noticed that a bunch apparently pulling mysterious things are usually found to be doing something plumb simple. If that bunch has got a getaway through the canyon, it explains how they've always been able to get in the clear after pulling something. Do you know anything about the upper end of the canyon?"

"Not over much," the sheriff admitted. "It's not the sort of a place folks go amblin' around in just for the fun of it, leadin' up into a desert like it does. But I have got a notion it wouldn't be hard to get into up to the north. It must sort of peter out up there. No hills to box it. I've a notion some old-timers hereabouts would know, but I'm from the southeast end of the county and not over familiar with this section."

One or two of the cowhands who made up the posse professed the belief that a descent into the canyon would be comparatively easy some twenty miles to the north.

"I was out on the desert up there a few years back," one said. "It's a heckuva

section, all right. I rec'lect riding down into a big gulch up there, hopin' to find water. I followed the draw for a ways, but it kept gettin' deeper and deeper, and drier all the time, so I give it up. I've a notion that draw might lead into the canyon."

Hatfield nodded. "It would be perfect for an on-the-run bunch," he pointed out to the sheriff. "There's no trailing anything over the Tonto. Once out there, especially with a little wind blowing, and they'd be in the clear. Then with a private back door to town, they'd be sitting pretty."

"Sure hope you're right," grunted Walsh. "Well, we'd ought to find out, one way or the other, before long."

A little later, with the town well behind them, Hatfield ventured further advice.

"Slow down a bit," he told Walsh. "No sense in running our horses' legs off. If they're coming this way, they'll take it easy. They won't want to make town before dark. What we're looking for is a proper place to hole up and wait for them. They can't turn aside anywhere, and I figure they won't begin splitting up till they're pretty close to Sanders."

The sheriff agreed without question. He did not appear to think it strange that Hatfield should be giving the orders and he obeying them. Nor did any of the possemen offer suggestions or objections.

They had covered nearly fifteen miles and the sun was already well down the western sky, when Hatfield suddenly called a halt. The canyon had narrowed somewhat, the cliffs drawing together and overhanging. Here the brush thinned out leaving a comparatively open space some two hundred yards in width before the gorge widened and the growth began again.

"This is perfect," he told the others. "They'll come through this gut bunched, and we'll have the drop on them. We'll be holed up and they'll be in the open. Run the horses well back into the brush and leave them. Then we'll take up positions here to cover the whole open space."

The posse took up positons as Hatfield directed. A tedious wait ensued. Slowly the hours passed. The canyon became shadowy with advanced evening. Sheriff Walsh grew acutely uneasy.

"I hate to think what folks will say when we come back with an empty sack," he muttered.

"You're not back yet," Hatfield told him. "Take it easy, now."

Another half hour passed, with the gloom increasing in the narrow gorge and the sheriff's gloom increasing in direct ratio.

"We won't be able to shoot in another ten minutes," Kells muttered.

Suddenly Hatfield held up his hand. The others heard it, too, a faint clicking sound.

"Get set!" the Ranger said in low tones. "Here they come. Walsh, you do the talking when I give the word, not before."

The clicking swiftly loudened to the beat of a number of horses' irons moving at a good pace, but unhurriedly. There was a crackling in the brush ahead. A body of men rode into view, a dozen or more. Riding carelessly at ease, they cantered forward across the open space.

"All right," Hatfield whispered to Walsh. "Tell it to 'em!"

Instantly the sheriff's stentorian bellow blared forth—

"In the name of the law! Halt! You are under arrest!"

Followed a storm of exclamations, a clashing of hoofs and a jangle of bit irons as the approaching horsemen jerked their mounts to a halt. Hands flashed to belts.

"Let 'em have it!" Hatfield thundered. Both his guns let go with a stunning roar.

Yells, shrieks and curses arose. The narrow gorge fairly exploded to the crash of gunfire.

The owlhoots were backing their horses and blazing away at the dimly seen possemen. Four of their saddles had been emptied by the first deadly volley. Almost instantly, two more men were down. A voice rang out, clear, peremptory—

"Back! Hightail! It's a trap!"

The remaining outlaws whirled their horses. Hatfield leaped forward, heedless of the lead storming around him. He fired again and again till the hammers of his guns clicked on empty shells. Beside him, Kells and the sheriff were shooting as fast as they could pull trigger.

In a moment it was over. Five riders, bending low in their hulls, went crashing into the brush to the north. Riderless horses were milling and dashing in every direction. Seven forms lay sprawled on

the canyon floor.

"After 'em!" yelled the sheriff. But Hatfield instantly countermanded the order.

"They've got a head start," he told Walsh. "It'll take time to go for our horses, and it'll be black dark in ten minutes. They know the ground, and we don't. They'd either beat us to the way out or they'd hole up somewhere and mow us down as we came floundering along in the dark. Look the bodies over and catch those horses. Their saddle pouches look full. Anybody hurt bad?"

One posseman had a hole through the fleshly part of his upper arm. Another had suffered a bullet gashed cheek. A slug had burned a streak along the ribs of a third.

"Nothing serious," Hatfield observed thankfully as he proceeded to stanch the flow of blood from the punctured arm and bind it up.

"What did you find, Walsh?" he called in answer to an excited whoop from the sheriff.

"These pouches are plumb stuffed with dinero," the sheriff boomed back. "By gosh, I've a notion we got darn nigh the whole lot of the payroll money back."

"That's good," Hatfield replied. "What about those birds on the ground?"

"All done for, proper," Kells reported. "I'm sure I've seen a couple of 'em in town, hangin' around the saloons."

"Me, too," added a posseman. "I remember three of 'em. One I played poker with once in the Ace-Full. He said he rode for an outfit over in the Bend. Didn't look like he'd handled a rope or an iron for quite a spell, I rec'lect."

However, nobody could recall anything but vague recollections of having seen one or the other of the dead men in town. Hatfield could learn nothing relative to their associations, if any.

"One thing is about sure, Roma ain't one of 'em," growled the sheriff. "None of 'em got the look of bein' able to run a outfit like this. Border scum, all of 'em."

"I've a large notion it was Roma we heard yelling to the others to high-tail," observed Hatfield.

"Chances are you're right," agreed the sheriff. "His sort always does the quick thinkin'."

"If they'd only showed ten minutes earlier," lamented Kells. "Then we would have got a good look at all of 'em. As it was, their faces were just white blurs in the dark."

The pockets of the dead men turned out nothing of significance. But the sheriff exulted over the contents of the saddle pouches.

'And we sure put a crimp in Roma's tail," he crowed. "Busted his gang all to blazes. Reckon we won't hear much of that sidewinder for a spell."

"But the head of the snake got away," Hatfield remarked to Kells. "And that sort of a head grows another body in a hurry."

After roping the bodies to the backs of the horses, Sheriff Walsh waddled over and solemnly shook hands with Jim Hatfield.

"Feller," he said, "if you have another hunch, bring it around and I'll foller it from here to breakfast. All right, boys, we might as well head back for town. I'm gettin' hungry."

Excitement was great in Sanders when the posse arrived with the bodies and more than two thirds of the money looted from the express car. Several citizens, including bartenders and other tradesmen, were convinced that they had seen one or another of the slain owlhoots before, but could add nothing more of value.

"The darn town has been full of mavericks, comin' and goin', ever since the gold strike," growled Sheriff Walsh. "Was bad enough even before that. This is a handy stop-over point for that sort. The nerve of 'em, to hole up here right under my nose!"

They learned that a wreck train had gotten the derailed express car back on the track, so that the delayed Flyer could continue on its belated way.

"Hope Mary got her Chinese cook to the ranch before Stuffy Jones killed somebody with his messes," chuckled Kells. "Sauerkraut boiled in coffee!"

Sheriff Walsh and the possemen industriously spread around the story of the successful maneuver and Hatfield was the recipient of admiring glances as he and Kells ate a late supper together.

"You're gettin' plenty of attention, feller," the mine owner chuckled.

"Yes, and some of it may be the sort I won't relish," the Ranger returned grimly.

"Uh-huh," Kells agreed. "I've a notion quite a few gents in this pueblo won't feel over friendly toward you, or to the rest of us, for that matter. But I can't help feelin' pretty good about it all. Quite a few gents who have been lookin' the other way when I passed by, of late, have made it a point to come up and speak to me. Looks like I'm gettin' deeper and deeper in your debt all the time."

## CHAPTER IX

### *Gift of the Gods*

HATFIELD and Kells spent the night in town, and experienced no untoward incident. The next morning, a coroner's jury speedily justified the slaying of the seven owlhoots and recommended that the sheriff run down the rest of the varmints as speedily as possible.

"Payday will be a day late this month," Kells observed as they rode back to the Tumbling K. "And if it hadn't been for you, it would have been more than a day late. The bank wouldn't have been able to handle the payroll for all the mines without the dinero we recovered."

Hatfield nodded, his eyes on the country around. Abruptly he asked a question.

"The other day, while we were riding out to your place," he remarked, "you mentioned that Bern Cowdry's father got killed in Arizona. How did it happen?"

Kells hesitated before replying.

"I ain't much on passin' around talk I ain't sure about," he said at length. "The story goes that Chet Cowdry got hisself plugged during a stage holdup. I ain't sure it's true, but that's how the talk goes. Chet was always the black sheep of a good family, it 'pears. Had trouble with his brother, got mixed up in crooked gamblin' and left this section, years back. Walt Cowdry never talked much about him. He was a salty hombre, all right, and I reckon young Bern takes after him.

"But nobody has ever knowed Bern to do anything off color. He's worked hard and behaved himself proper since he showed here. Reckon it ain't fair to hold what his dad may have done against him. That's why I didn't mention how Chet Cowdry got took off when I was talkin' to you the other day. Fact is, about the only thing Bern ever does out of the way is gamble. He likes cards and plays considerable in town, and never seems to have much luck. Him and old Walt had some rows over that, I understand.

"Walt was dead set against gamblin' in any form. He said gamblin' was what ruined his brother. He said Chet was all right till he took to foolin' with cards and finally ended up in a shootin' and had to cut and run. Reckon he was scairt Bern might get into a rukus of that sort. Bern's a hot-tempered jigger."

Hatfield nodded again. "I see," he said. "No, it isn't right to blame anybody for what someone else does, even if he does happen to be a member of the same family. Most every family can drop a loop on a maverick belonging to them, if they look back far enough."

"That's so," Kells agreed soberly. "Well, here we are, and everything looks to be under control. Reckon they ain't had no trouble since we been gone."

Kells removed the sack of payroll money from his saddle pouch and stowed it away in his small office safe. Then they inspected mine and mill and found everything going smoothly.

"And now, feller, I'm goin' to ask a real favor of you," Kells said when they returned to the office. "Reckon you're good at figures, seein' as you're so good at everything else. I ain't, and makin' up that darn payroll is a plumb awful chore for me. Think you could handle it this afternoon?"

"Reckon I can bear up under the strain," Hatfield smiled reply.

"Plumb much obliged," Kells said gratefully. 'I'll get you the time sheets. The money's in the safe, and here is the combination on this slip of paper. Seein' as you're takin' over, I'll ride around a mite this afternoon and see how things are goin' on the spread.

AFTER eating, Hatfield settled himself to the task of office work. Kells would have been astonished had he seen how easily and quickly the Lone Wolf did away with the "plumb awful chore." An hour after sitting down at the desk, Hatfield put the filled, and identified envelopes in the safe, closed it and rolled himself

a cigarette. As he was fumbling out the makin's, his hand struck against the small golden image with the opal eyes. He drew it forth and glanced at it.

"Reckon I might as well stow this thing in the safe, too," he decided. "Better than packin' it around with me. I'll just poke it back in one of the compartments and nobody will notice it there."

By the bright sunlight streaming through the window, he examined the thing again. The line of jointure where the peg of stone fitted into the base was very fine and showed every indication of crafty workmanship. He rasped the slightly rough surface of the stone with his finger nail.

"Been busted loose from something, all right," he mused. He hefted the image in his palm. Suddenly he was struck by an idea.

He located a rule in the desk and carefully measured the image, noting its dimensions on a sheet of paper. Then he set it aside and did some figuring. Next he meticulously adjusted the balances of the assay scales on a nearby table.

He placed the image in the pan and weighed it on the scales which were so sensitive that, Hatfield knew, if he weighed a two-inch scrap of paper on them and then wrote his name on the paper with a coarse pencil and weighed it again, the scales would take notice of the addition. He jotted down the result and compared it with what his measuring and figuring had attained. He uttered an exclamation of satisfaction.

"Thought the darn thing was light for its size," he muttered. "It's hollow. Here goes for another hunch."

Eyes glowing with interest, he went to work on the base of the image with the point of his knife.

Dislodging the stone plug was considerable of a chore, but he finally accomplished it. A small round hole showed where the plug had fitted snugly into the soft metal.

Hatfield turned the image upright and shook it. A silky rustling rewarded his efforts. He tapped the base against the table top, shook it again.

From the opening dropped a tiny roll of parchmentlike paper tied with a thread of fibre. He undid the knot and carefully spread the sheet.

Written on the surface in faded ink were faint but decipherable Spanish words. He read them without difficulty.

*In Valle de la Luna* (he read) *is stored* (followed several illegible words) *against the day when the people will rise and drive the invader from the land of Anahuac and restore the ancient Gods to their wonted places. May the curse of Metzli, the curse of Huitzelcoatl, the curse of Quetzalcoatl be upon him who betrays the sacred trust, in his world, in the world beyond the stars, in the world beyond the world beyond the stars.*

"For the love of Pete!" Hatfield exclaimed. He turned the paper over. On the opposite side were seemingly meaningless lines.

But as he gazed on the dim strokes, they slowly took form to become an undoubted map of the wide walled canyon known as Moon Valley. At the upper end of the canyon was a small circle marked *Caverna*—Cave.

Hatfield stared at the drawing, a smile on his lips.

"So this is what they were after," he mused. "Buried treasure! A perfect setup—the ancient writing, the hidden map, everything. Uh-huh, buried Aztec gold. Huitzelcoatl was the Aztec god of war. Quetzalcoatl was the great god of the air. Metzli was the god of the underworld. Chances are this thing is a translation, perhaps from the Aztec writing of the knotted cords. Plumb perfect. And the chances are a hundred to one it doesn't mean a thing. The Southwest is full of such legends and campfire yarns and tall stories, handed down from father to son for generations. But men will rob and kill for a thing like this."

HE FINGERED the crackling paper, eyes serious again. "But it is liable to prove useful," his thoughts continued. "I figure they'll make another try for it, and that may give me a chance to drop my loop. The thing is beginning to tie up. Old Miguel, the Cowdry cook, for that's who that Mexican was, no doubt about it—old Miguel must have gotten hold of the image somehow, stole it, the chances are. Knew what was inside of it.

"Somehow or other, Roma and his bunch got onto it and set out to get it. Miguel high-tailed and they lit out to hunt for him. But between that darn snake and me, they didn't get it. Begin to see now why somebody is so anxious to ease Kells out of Moon Valley. So they can get hold of the valley and do their hunting uninterrupted. Everything in the valley belongs to Kells, of course. Evidently they knew the secret was inside the image."

He paused from his reflections to roll a cigarette.

"And," he added grimly, "I'm getting a mighty good notion who Roma is. Nobody but Bern Cowdry. Bern Cowdry, the son of an owlhoot, the man who brought Miguel to the Cross C spread. Well, he looks the part, all right. The big jigger I figured to be Roma wasn't him at all. I could swear that wasn't Cowdry. Blazes, that could have been Purdy! They said he was always riding off somewhere. Let's see, now. Yes that was a Sunday, and he wouldn't be working on a Sunday.

"And I'm beginning to see what Bern Cowdry was up to when he braced Kells out there on the trail. He knew he could beat Kells to the draw. He figured to do for Kells, and do for me at the same time. He knew I had the image on me. It would have been perfect. Talk about a cold-blooded jigger!"

For some time he sat smoking. Finally he pinched out his cigarette, restored the map to the image and replaced the stone plug. He wrapped the figurine in a handkerchief and stowed it away in the safe behind some papers.

Absorbed in the task, and his thoughts, he did not see the face peering in through the open window, a face that faded from sight before he turned around.

"Tomorrow is payday and there won't be any work," he mused. "Think I'll take myself a little ride just to prove this buried treasure business is all the plumb nonsense I figure it is."

Kells returned to the ranchhouse just after sundown.

"Everything going fine," he told Hatfield. "The boys are handling their chores all right. I'll be set to make a good beef shipment soon. Which will help."

The following morning the mine and mill workers rolled off to town in ore wagons. The cowboys, whooping and skylarking, rode with them.

"Be sore heads tomorrow, but they'll be happy," Kells chuckled as he and Hatfield watched them go. "Sort of nice to be on your own and have no responsibilities. Well, a feller has to pay for everything he gets in this world one way or another. I think I'll ride in myself, late this afternoon. Want to come along? The night watchman will be here to keep an eye on things."

"If you don't mind," Hatfield replied, "I'd like to take a ride up the valley today. I'd like to look your range over. Not used to being cooped up inside. After all, I was brought up on a spread and am sort of used to riding."

"You'll enjoy it," Kells instantly enthused. "She's a plumb fine little spread, feller, and it'd do any cowman good to look her over. Okay, I'll see you when I get back tonight, if you haven't gone to bed. Otherwise, tomorrow mornin'."

ABOUT midmorning, Hatfield got the rig on Goldy and rode off up the valley at a leisurely pace. Very quickly he decided that Kells had not exaggerated in speaking of his holdings. It was really beautiful range land. A fairly broad and deep creek flowed down the west side of the valley, gradually edging toward the center, as Hatfield approached its source at the head of the canyon.

The grass was tall and there were plenty of side walls to provide ample shelter against heat and storms. The cows were sleek and well fleshed. Hatfield could readly understand Kells desire to hold the valley, above all else.

"Feller was born and brought up a cowhand," he mused. "Got grass rope and horse in his blood. Never be satisfied away from them. Well, the way his mine is producing, he shouldn't have any trouble meeting all his obligations and getting plumb free title to his holdings here.

"And," he added, with a chuckle, "if I can just get this confounded mess in this section straightened out, I've a notion that little blue-eyed gal with the yellow hair will be helping him run it before long."

As he worked north, the canyon gradually narrowed. The perpendicular side walls were replaced by long, fairly steep brush grown and boulder strewn slopes

slashed by gloomy side canyons.

"A regular hole-in-the-wall country up here," he mused. "The sort of a place all kinds of yarns build up about."

Finally he reached the canyon's head, a brush grown gorge studded with chimney rocks and only a few hundred yards wide. The end wall of the box was a beetling, perpendicular cliff nearly a hundred feet in height.

Hatfield rode slowly along the cliff face to the west wall, turned and rode back to the east wall, an amused smile on his lips. Nowhere was there a cave, nor any indications that one had ever existed. The stream that flowed down the valley came plunging over the end wall in a feathery plume to foam and thunder in the catch basin at the cliff's base.

"The same old story," Hatfield chuckled. "Just something built up by a joker or somebody with a plumb vivid imagination. Well, it's what I expected. If all the gold indicated on these old maps and told about and written about really existed and was turned up, we'd be using the darn stuff to make boot scrapers."

He hooked one long leg comfortably over the saddlehorn, rolled and lighted a cigarette. For some minutes he sat smoking, listening to the thunder of the falling water and admiring its graceful curve over the tall cliff crest. Finally he pinched out the butt, cast it aside and rode back down the canyon, chuckling to himself. A quarter of a mile or so down canyon, he halted Goldy, turned and gazed at the pluming fall.

Suddenly his eyes grew serious and he stopped chuckling. He stared at the fall, turned and studied the swiftly flowing creek. He turned back to the fall and gave it concentrated attention for some moments. Again he stared at the fairly broad and deep stream hurrying down the canyon.

"Blazes!" he muttered. "If my eyes aren't going back on me, and I don't figure they are, there's just about three times as much water in the crick as is coming over the cliff. Now what's the answer to that?"

The answer was fairly obvious to the Lone Wolf. If the plainly apparent volume of water in the stream did not come over the cliff, it must come through or from under it. Which incontrovertible fact opened up interesting possibilities. He turned Goldy and rode back to the end of the gorge, dismounted and approached the cliff face at the edge of the fall.

FOR some moments he studied the water foaming into the catch basin. He eyed the tremulous film of spray beating against the rock wall, then turned and led Goldy down to where the grass grew luxuriantly amid the stones. He let the split reins trail.

"Go ahead and fill yourself up," he told the sorrel. "I'll be seeing you in a little while, I hope."

He returned to the cliff face, drew a deep breath and stepped into the curtain of spray showering the rock. Two cautious steps and he was beyond the veil of water, standing on a narrow ledge and gazing straight at the downward-rushing green and gold main body of the fall.

As he knew was usual with a cataract, there was an air filled hollow between the falling water and the cliff.

But this time there was more. A dark opening yawned in the cliff face, from which rushed a torrent of water much greater in volume than the fall.

"And that's where most of the water in the crick comes from," he muttered. "This is getting interesting."

The subterranean stream did not fill the cave mouth. On either side was a rocky floor some yards in width.

Hatfield stepped into the opening and eased forward a little ways. As he progressed, the wonderful green-gold light that filled the mouth of the cave quickly dimmed. Ahead was only black darkness.

"Wish I had something that would do for a torch," he told himself, "but anything I was packing would have gotten drenched, anyhow," he added, shaking some of the water from his clothes and hat.

He drew a tightly corked bottle from his pocket, wiped it off and shook out a couple of matches. On his boot sole, close to the heel, was a dry patch of leather. He struck the match on it. The tiny flame, flaring up instantly and burning with a steady glow, revealed a solid rock wall at his elbow, smooth and dry. The light penetrated but a few feet into the cave, however. Beyond was black darkness.

Hatfield hesitated a moment, then stepped forward again, feeling his way cautiously against possible pitfalls. He knew he could not become lost as long as he kept close to the purling water's edge. But before he had covered two hundred yards distance, the stream turned almost at right angles. He cautiously followed its course and butted up against the far wall. He struck another match and saw that the water gushed from under the side wall.

But this was not the end of the cave. The black bore stretched on ahead.

"Well, if I keep against the wall, I still can't get myself lost," he declared, and moved ahead again.

He covered another hundred yards, slowly and carefully. The rock floor was perfectly smooth, with no apparent holes or loose stones. Instinctively he increased his pace a little under a feeling of false security.

The passage developed a gentle downward slope but remained smooth and unobstructed. Hatfield stepped out confidently. Then, with a gasp, he hurled himself backward and sideways as his outstretching foot encountered nothing but empty space. His other foot dashed against a loose fragment of stone and he pitched forward into the dark. A faint, sullen splash drifted upward from the abysmal depths of a gulf that split the cavern floor.

## CHAPTER X

### *"Treasure"*

WEAK and shaking, cold sweat dampening his face and his palms, Jim Hatfield lay where he had fallen across rough stone steps that plunged dizzily downward into the darkness, his legs hanging over the chasm, his back against the cave wall. For moments he did not dare move. Then slowly and carefully he inched his legs and feet back over the edge and got shakily to his feet. He took out his matches and struck one.

Hugging the cavern wall, the steps stretched downward before him, a rough stair hewn with incalculable labor from the living rock. The gulf that lapped the outer edge was of unknown width.

"And from the sound sent back by that rock I kicked over the edge, it goes down to the front door of Hades," he muttered. "Say, this is getting just a mite too interesting."

He struck another match and peered downward. For a moment he hesitated. Reason said to go back the way he had come, but curiosity urged him to find out where the mysterious stair led.

Curiosity finally won out. With the greatest caution he began descending the stair, hugging the rock wall, testing each step before trusting his weight upon it.

The descent was a nightmare in the black dark. All desire to hurry left him and he crept downward at a snail's pace. At first he counted the steps, but soon lost track of their number. He developed a queer feeling that he was walking down an unfolding ribbon of eternity, without beginning and without end.

Abruptly he jerked his advancing foot back and hugged the wall. His boot had splashed in water.

He struck another match and peered ahead. Before him stretched a smooth, black expanse. No ripple disturbed its deathly still surface. It looked like the combined oozing from all the graves in the world. He hesitated again as the match flickered out and the black dark clamped down upon him with an intensity that could almost be felt.

"But whoever built this darn staircase didn't do it to reach a diving pool," he reasoned. "Of course the water may have settled here long after the stair was built. May have no bottom, but reckon I'll take a chance. Doesn't appear to be any current, and I should be able to swim back if it gets too deep."

He stepped into the pool and was surprised to find it was not unpleasantly cold. He could feel the steps still under his feet, but before the water rose much beyond mid-thigh, they ended. His feet rested on a smooth, level surface. He took a cautious step forward, another. The water rose no higher.

The pool proved to be little more than twenty yards in width. It began to shallow and a moment later Hatfield found himself on dry ground. He peered ahead, but the darkness was still Stygian. The flame

of a match showed a narrow passage.

Again he began his cautious advance. Five minutes of slow groping passed and suddenly the darkness ahead began to gray. Swiftly the light grew stronger. The passage curved. He rounded the bulge and stood staring in astonishment.

The gloomy gallery had widened into a wide, almost circular amphitheatre of a cup. On all sides was a curving wall of dark stone. Only a few paces to the left was a chasm that seemed to drop down and down, depth upon vertiginous depth, to earth heart. Sunlight poured down from where, far, far above the dark lip of the cup was rimmed with the deep blue of the Texas sky.

"An old crater," Hatfield exclaimed. "A minor blowhole when this section was a scene of volcanic activity. Sort of like the Ashes Mountains country up around the Guadalupes." He turned and glanced around and uttered a low whistle as his eyes fell upon what crouched against the wall of black rock, protected by a crude overhang of the lava cliff above.

WINGED and scaled, birdlike and serpentine, a great stone figure stared back at him with eyes of reddish quartz. Surmounting its feathered headdress, fantastically carved from gray stone, was a gleaming crescent. Before it was the stone slab of an altar, the ominous blood channels scoring its surface.

"*Metzli!*" Hatfield exclaimed. "*Metzli*, the moon god. The Valley of the Moon. This was an old Aztec temple. Lots of them found over in the San Juan River Valley in New Mexico, and quite a few in the Texas Big Bend country."

He stepped closer. Something apparently perched on the outer corner of the altar caught his eye. He stooped to examine it, and uttered another exclamation.

The tiny gold figure was an exact replica of the jewel-eyed image stored in the Tumbling K mill safe. He reached out and gave it a tug. With a sharp snapping sound it came free in his hand. There showed the clean, fresh cleavage of a broken stone peg driven into the base of the image. A fragment of the peg remained imbedded in the stone slab of the altar.

Hatfield examined the opposite corner of the altar. There, too, was the upright splinter of a broken stone peg, its surface dull and weathered.

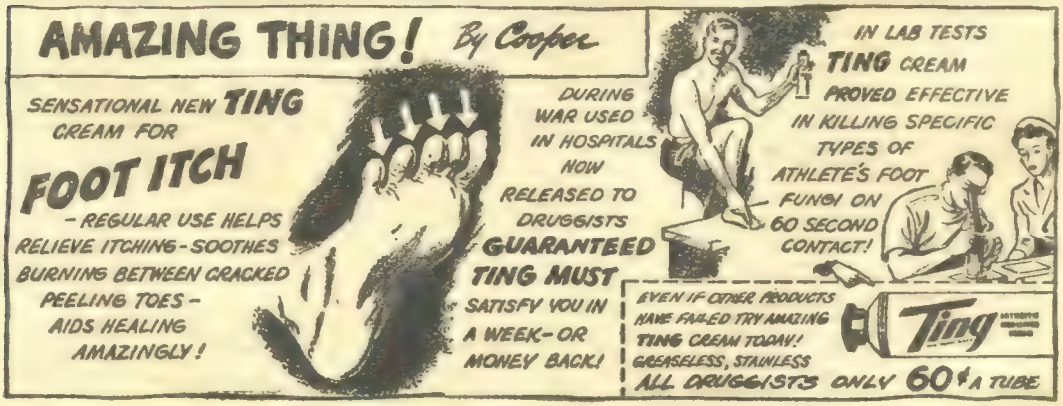
"The one old Miguel gave me came from here," the Ranger exulted. "Was broken away a long, long time ago. Doubtless the story of the hidden map went with it. Somehow or other Miguel got hold of it, and heard the legend connected with it. If this doesn't beat all!"

He pocketed the image and walked around the great stone statue. He paused, staring, and suddenly laughed aloud.

He was gazing on the hidden "treasure" of Moon Valley!

A deep niche had been hollowed in the lava rock, extending far around the wide curve of the cup. Stacked in the niche were row on row of spears tipped with copper, huge clubs set with spikes of obsidian, heavy copper swords, long bow staves, the strings long since rotted away, coats of lacquered mail, painted helms of hardwood, fashioned like the heads of pumas, wolves, snakes, and other implements of war.

[Turn page]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"Stored against the day of the land of Anahuac's need!" Hatfield paraphrased the words written on the back of the ancient map. "Of course, what else? Gold meant nothing to the Aztecs. They used it only for ornaments and decorations. For them it held no real value. They were tillers of the soil and fighting men. Here in this secret place they had stacked up arms against the day of war when they hoped to drive out the Spanish invaders. Some nice museum pieces here, but no buried gold.

"Say, it's a pity that bunch of sidewinders didn't manage to hit on this place. It would have been something to hear them cuss. Well, I've had a nice trip, with a laugh at the end of it. Reckon I'd better climb back up that snake hole and head for home, and try and figure a way to drop a loop on those hellions. Nothing more to see here, and no way out but up those rocks."

With a last glance at the grim stone god watching over his hidden treasure that would never be put to use, Hatfield reentered the dark passage.

First, however, he plucked one of the old bow staves from its place in the niche. The wood was tinder dry and when he touched a match to its tip, it burned with a steady flame.

With the aid of the improvised torch, crossing the pool and climbing the stair was easy. Just as the sun was sinking in scarlet and gold behind the west wall of the canyon, he stepped through the filmy edge of the waterfall to see his sorrel standing nearby and patiently awaiting him.

Still chuckling, Hatfield rode down the valley through the rose flecked blue of the approaching dusk. But his jovial mood soon left him. The treasure hunt, so called, had ended in a ludicrous anticlimax, but the grim business of dropping a loop on Roma and his bunch was still very real.

"That scaly varmint will bust loose someplace else in a hurry, if he ain't hogtied," the Lone Wolf thought. "He's as fangin' as any rattler that ever coiled under a bush, and losing the payroll money won't set well with him. He'll be out to even up for that in a hurry. And I haven't got the least notion how to stop him. The suspicions I have aren't the sort of thing you can present in court and hope to get anywhere. A good lawyer would make me look as short of brains as a terrapin is of feathers. Well, maybe we'll get a break."

Even then the break was in the making, in a totally unexpected fashion.

HATFIELD took his time riding down the valley, appreciating to the full the loveliness of the walled rangeland as the Master Painter limned the sky in crimson and mauve and molten bronze. The rim of the cliffs was ringed about with saffron light that crowned their robes of dusky purple with an imperial diadem. Birds sang sleepily in the growth. Each twig tip was a gem of dying radiance, and as a strengthening wind rippled the grasses the wide expanse was a sea of drowsy emerald washed in gold.

"Looks like a change in weather, the Ranger told his horse. "Those clouds in the west are piling up fast. Well, reckon we could stand a mite of rain. Been sort of dry of late."

Finally the Tumbling K buildings came into view. Ranchhouse and bunkhouse were dark, but a glow of light showed in the office window of the mill, doubtless lit by the watchman Hatfield had posted since the night of the fire.

Hatfield turned Goldy's head toward the barn, but before he reached it, he heard a hoarse cry from the direction of the dark mill. He turned the sorrel quickly and rode toward the light that streamed through the office window.

A figure appeared in the door, clutching the jamb for support. It was the night watchman. His eyes were wild, his face caked with dried blood that had flowed from a jagged furrow splitting his scalp just above the right temple.

Hatfield pulled up and unforked in a ripple of movement. He went up the steps three at a time.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"The hyderphobia skunk shot me," panted the watchman. "I come to in time to throw lead at him, but he dived through the window and got away. I heard his horse's irons clickin' as he hightailed."

Hatfield took the man by the arm, led him to the office and seated him in a chair. With deft fingers he examined the wound.

"No bones busted," was his diagnosis.

"I'll tie it up and it will be okay. Now tell me what happened."

"I was just comin' into the mill, makin' my rounds," said the watchman. "I was in the passage outside the office. I just got a glimpse of him and there was a blaze of light and the roof fell in on me. He'd cut down and creased me. Must have figgered he'd done me in. Reckon it was the dynamite goin' off that jolted the senses back in my head."

"The dynamite?"

The watchman gestured to a shadowy corner of the room. Hatfield glanced quickly in the direction indicated.

The door of the office safe, ripped from its hinges, lay against the wall. Papers were scattered over the floor.

"The jigger must have been after the payroll money," said the watchman. "Reckon he got his days mixed up and didn't know the boys were handed their envelopes this mornin'. Wasn't anything much in the box, was there?"

"Very little," Hatfield replied. He crossed to the rifled safe. Some coins and a few bills were scattered among the papers on the floor. He thrust his hand inside a certain compartment and felt about.

The tiny golden image of Metzli, the moon god, was gone.

## CHAPTER XI

### *The Last Deal*

HATFIELD stood for a moment, thinking deeply. "So, there was still a third man working here in cahoots with Roma and his bunch," he muttered. "Must have seen me put the statue in there. Wonder how much he did see? A lot depends on that. If he saw me take the map out of the image, things may work out fine. I'm going to play a hunch in that direction, anyhow."

With a word to the injured watchman, he left the office. From his saddlepouch he procured a roll of bandage and a pot of antiseptic ointment. He got water and cleansed the watchman's wound, dressed it and bandaged it expertly.

"That had ought to hold you till you get to town and let the doctor look it over," he said. "Come on up to the house, now, and I'll rustle us a mite of chuck and some steamin' coffee. Reckon you can stand both, and I'm sort of empty myself.

"You did a good chore, feller, by coming to and throwing lead at that horned toad," he added. "Given time, he might have set fire to the mill, or something. Let's go."

Hatfield first cared for his horse, then quickly made coffee and rustled a meal. They ate heartily, to the accompaniment of thunder muttering and rumbling in the west. Hatfield rolled cigarettes for both of them and they smoked in comfortable silence. The Ranger pinched out his butt and stood up.

"I'm heading for town," he told the watchman. "You stay here in the house and rest that head. There'll be nothing more to worry about tonight. Keep your ears open, though. When you hear horses two or three hours from now, the chances are it will be me, with the boss and some other jiggers.

"I'll let out a whoop as soon as we clear the brush. That will let you know it's us. If anybody else comes snooping around, there's a Winchester over there in the corner, and a box of cartridges on the mantelpiece. Load her up, and use her, if thing don't look right. I'll be seeing you."

Hatfield rode to Sanders at a fast pace. Thunder was still rumbling in the west, and the sky was heavily overcast, but the rain held off.

"May work to our advantage, if it comes down hard," he thought.

When he reached town, he immediately repaired to the sheriff's office. He found one of the deputies there.

"Where's Walsh?" he asked.

"Over to the Ace-Full, with Kells, eatin'," said the deputy.

"Go get him, and Kells, and bring them here," Hatfield ordered peremptorily. The deputy immediately hurried out to perform the chore. Hatfield rolled a cigarette, sat down at the sheriff's desk and waited.

The deputy was back in short order. With him were Hugh Kells and Sheriff Walsh, the latter wiping his mustache.

"What's the big notion?" he demanded in injured tones. "Hustlin' a man away from his dinner half et? I left a full bowl

of stew on the table."

"Got a chore for you," Hatfield replied. He was fumbling with a cunningly concealed secret pocket in his broad leather belt as he spoke. He laid something on the table before them.

"G-good gosh!" stuttered the deputy.

"Well, I'll be danged," said Kells.

"I might have knowed it," rumbled the sheriff.

The object on the table was a gleaming silver star set on a silver circle, the honored, feared and respected badge of the Texas Rangers.

"I might have knowed it," the sheriff repeated. "You do things like a Ranger."

Abruptly his eyes widened. "By gosh, I got you placed!" he burst forth. "Been wonderin' who it was I'd heard about you reminded me of. You're the Lone Wolf!"

"Been called that," Hatfield admitted.

The others stared at the almost legendary figure whose exploits were already famous from the Rio Grande to the Red River and beyond.

"The Lone Wolf," repeated the sheriff. "Bill McDowell's Lieutenant! So Captain Bill sent you over here, eh?"

"That's right," Hatfield replied, "in answer to a letter written by Walt Cowdry. Now, Walsh, I'm playing another hunch."

"Play it, and I'll foller it," declared the sheriff. "What you want me to do?"

"Get your other deputy," Hatfield directed. "We're riding. I figure the five of us will be enough, and we may not have any time to waste, although I don't think anything will bust loose before daylight, especially if the rain comes on, as it looks like it will."

AS THEY rode out of town, Hatfield told his followers as much as he deemed necessary. "I've a prime notion that snooper who saw me stow the image in the safe also saw me put the map back inside it," he concluded. "If he did, I figure they'll make a quick try for the gold they'll think is hid in the cave. I feel they're getting pretty jittery and will want to make a good haul and pull out of the section.

"Things haven't been going well for them of late. They put one over on me this time, all right. I didn't keep as close a watch on the mine workers as I should have. They evidently had one more jigger planted there, and he was keeping close tabs on me all the time. But it may work out for the best after all."

They paused at the Tumbling K ranchhouse and found the watchman okay. He reported that nothing had happened during Hatfield's absence.

"That helps," the Lone Wolf said. "The chances are they won't get there ahead of us, as they would have if they were forced to enter the canyon by the mouth. I felt pretty sure when I was up at the head of the gorge, that there were ways into the valley by way of the northern slopes. They're all split up by side canyons and gulches. Doubtless there's a trail from the east through one or another of them. So I'm hoping they will hold off so they'll hit the canyon after daylight.

"I'd say they have done considerable snooping around the upper end of the valley, but with that tangle of draws and brakes up there, their search was practically hopeless till they got hold of the map. That would tell them just about where to look, but they couldn't hope to spot the place in the dark on a rainy night."

"Sounds reasonable," admitted the sheriff. "Hope you're right."

"I'd better be," Hatfield predicted grimly. "If they are already there, holed up and waiting for daylight, we may get a reception we don't like. We'll have to take it careful and easy after we get well up the valley. Can't afford the chance of running into a drygulching."

The sky was graying with approaching dawn when they reached the box end of the canyon, after a cautious advance for the last few miles. All was silent, and apparently deserted. The rain had begun to fall and clouds of mist swirled and eddied in the narrow gorge.

Drenched by the rain and chilled by the wind that soughed down the gorge, they concealed their horses nearby and took up uncomfortable positions of concealment in the growth close to the cliff face.

Slowly the light grew stronger, but the rain and the mist made everything appear grotesque and unreal. The roar of the fall sounded hollowly, a deep undertone to the swish of the rain and the thin wailing of the wind.

An hour passed, with the wind steadily

rising and the rain coming down harder. The mist clouds filled the canyon to the brim. The chimney rocks and clumps of growth became weird forms that seemed to writhe with tortured life. The scene was unreal, a formless inferno where time stood still and merged with the endless void of eternity.

"Get set!" Hatfield suddenly whispered. "They're coming!"

Shadowy shapes appeared from down canyon. They resolved into five horsemen riding slowly toward the pluming fall with peering eyes. They pulled up not ten yards distant.

Jim Hatfield stepped into view. On his broad breast gleamed the star of the Rangers. His face was set in bleak lines, his eyes were coldly gray as the misted granite of the canyon walls. He had a quick glimpse of the giant, red-haired Purdy, of Shelton, the former mill foreman, of a lean little rat of a man he instantly recognized as one of the mine laborers, and of Bern Cowdry's devilishly handsome, rage-distorted face. His voice rolled in thunder above the roar of the falls and the hiss of the wind-driven rain—

"In the name of the State of Texas! I arrest Bern Cowdry and others for robbery and murder. Anything you say—"

His voice was drowned by a bellow of gunfire as owlhoots and possemen went into action. Shooting with both hands, he saw Purdy reel and fall. He saw the treacherous mine worker go down. Two more men had their hands in the air and were howling for mercy.

Bern Cowdry, shooting and cursing, whirled his tall black horse and went charging down the canyon, lead hissing all around him. A split second and the swirling mist had swallowed him up.

Hatfield bounded to where Goldy stood. He flung himself into the saddle and sent the great sorrel racing in pursuit.

Over the stones they flew, branches raking them, the rain lashing them like liquid whips. Ahead was only the writhing mist wreaths, the grotesque chimney rocks and the bristle of thickets.

But Hatfield knew the fugitive would have to stick to the creek bank. Elsewhere the growth was too thick, the ground too littered with huge boulders. He bent low in the saddle, stuffing fresh cartridges into the cydinders of his guns and peering ahead.

They covered a mile, with death or broken bones promised with every straining leap of the great golden horse. The better part of another mile, and Hatfield began to wonder if Cowdry had turned off by way of some secret track he knew.

And then through the mist and rain showed a vague shape speeding south. It was the black horse and its rider.

Hatfield's voice rang out, urgent, compelling—

"Trail, Goldy, trail!"

The sorrel responded with a gallant burst of speed. His irons clanged on the stones, showering sparks, his powerful

*Fighting to solve a sinister mystery of the Red River region, Jim Hatfield pits himself against a masked mob of murderous renegades when outlaw guns flash a message of defiance!*

**THE SKELETON RIDERS**

by

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legs shot backward like pistons as he fairly poured his long body over the ground. Slowly but surely he closed the distance.

A bullet whined past Hatfield's face. The report, dull and hollow, was swept away on the wind. Another slug, closer this time. But the Ranger grimly held his fire. He had a glimpse of the white blur that was Bern Cowdry's distorted face.

The great black horse was giving its best, but it was not enough. Slowly, the racing sorrel closed in. Hatfield reached for his gun.

Abruptly Bern Cowdry gave up the race. He jerked his mount to a slithering, stumbling halt, whirled him on a dime and faced his pursuer, guns roaring.

Hatfield also pulled up. Shot for shot he answered the owlhoot's fire. The horses plunged and snorted as the guns roared. Their riders were flickering, swaying shadows blasting death at one another through the veil of the mist and the rain.

Hatfield felt the burn of a bullet along his cheek. Another nicked his shoulder. A third ripped the sleeve of his shirt. He steadied Goldy with a word and pressed both triggers, his guns clamped rock-steady against his hips.

Bern Cowdry screamed, a scream of rage and pain and terror that ended in a bubbling shriek. He strove to raise his guns for a last shot, but they dropped from his nerveless hands. He lurched sideways, plunged to the ground, writhed an instant and was still.

Hatfield got stiffly from the saddle. With slow steps he walked to the side of the fallen outlaw, gun ready for instant action. Then he holstered it and stood staring down at the quiet form. Bern Cowdry was dead.

A moment later, Sheriff Walsh and Hugh Kells dashed up. The others had been left to guard the two prisoners.

"Bern Cowdry," said the sheriff, shaking his head over the quiet form. "I'd never have believed it. He seemed a real sort of feller. Gambled a good deal, and drank some. But those are the things you expect a young feller to do. Well, blood will tell. His dad took the wrong trail when he was young. Pore Walt never could do anything with Chet. Walt was steady-goin', Chet was just the opposite. Well, it happens everywhere, but it's a pity."

THEY rode back up the canyon. While the sheriff looked over the dead men, Hatfield questioned the two prisoners. With visions of dancing on nothing at the end of a rope, the owlhoots talked freely and told him all they knew.

"I got the whole thing pretty well pieced together," Hatfield told Walsh and Kells. "Old Miguel was one of a bunch Bern Cowdry worked with over in Arizona, before things got too dull to hold them there, although, like Cowdry, he originally came from this section. He had that golden image.

"Reckon it came down through his family. The legend of Moon Valley came along with it. Miguel knew the map was inside the image and knew something was hidden in the valley, he didn't know just what. He figured it must be a store of gold buried by the old Aztec priests.

"But Miguel was superstitious. He was nearly all Indian, of the old Aztec blood, and he feared the concentrated curse of the evil Aztec gods the priests promised for anyone revealing the secret to someone of alien blood, meaning chiefly, of course, the Teules, as the Aztecs named the Spanish invaders. So Miguel never dared make a try for the treasure he thought was here."

"Then how did Cowdry catch onto it?" Kells asked as Hatfield paused to roll a cigarette.

Hatfield gestured to one of the prisoners. "That little one there with Shelton is also half Indian," he explained. "Miguel told him something about it—not all. He merely told him there was much gold hidden in Moon Valley. That feller wasn't scared of the old gods like Miguel was. He told Bern Cowdry what Miguel said. Cowdry believed him and immediately set out to get hold of Moon Valley. He figured that what Miguel was talking about was a rich gold ledge. Kells making his strike in the mouth of the valley tended to corroborate the notion. But meanwhile Cowdry set the other half-Indian to watch Miguel and try and learn more."

"And he found out Miguel had the image?"

Hatfield pinched out his cigarette butt and cast it aside.

"That's right," he replied. "He didn't learn the secret of the image, but he was smart enough to figure it contained the secret in one way or other. So they decided to kill Miguel and get it.

"But Miguel caught on and high-tailed. They lit out after him and trailed him into the desert. Were closing in on him, but that darn rattlesnake beat them to it, and then I came along. Miguel was grateful to me for what I did for him, and I reckon, too, he figured it was a chance to doublecross the bunch that doublecrossed him. So he gave me the image. He tried hard to tell me about it, but died before he could get the words out."

Hatfield rolled another cigarette, his eyes thoughtful.

"A good example of crooked owlhoot thinking," he concluded. "The sort of thing that, sooner or later, always causes them to make the slips that are their undoing. They were doing pretty well by themselves in this section, but they couldn't be satisfied. Had to be reaching out for more. Bern Cowdry was always in debt, of course, through his gambling. He had a first-rate chance of sharing in his uncle's holdings, if he'd gone straight after he came back here, but he had to go after what he considered was easy money."

"Easy money is usually mighty hard money before you finish with it," the sheriff observed sententiously. "I reckon Bern did for Walt Cowdry, too, eh?"

"So Shelton told me," Hatfield replied. "Shelton said Bern and his uncle had a final grand row over Bern's gambling and that his uncle ordered him off the place. So he killed Walt Cowdry in a way that would throw suspicion on Kells. He knew, of course, that if he was forced to sever connections with the Cross C, he couldn't carry on in the section any longer. The Cross C was his cover-up, and a plumb perfect one."

"Suppose Purdy and Shelton and that other one were part of his Arizona bunch?" remarked Kells.

"That's so," Hatfield said. "By the way, did Bern Cowdry recommend one of those jiggers to you?"

"By gosh, he did," Kells replied. "He recommended Purdy as a first-rate hard rock man when I was lookin' for somebody to take the place of my first drill foreman who didn't show up one day. It had plumb slipped my mind till right now."

"Chances are they did for your former foreman to make way for Purdy," Hatfield conjectured. "We'll ask about that later. Well, reckon we might as well be headed for town with that pair. I'll be riding on this evening. Looks like the rain is letting up. Captain Bill will have another little chore lined up for me by the time I get back to the Post. I'll try that short cut across the desert again. Should be cooler at night and after the rain. Sorry I can't stay for the wedding, Kells. Tell Mary hello for me, and the best of luck to you both."

They watched him ride away some hours later, the red rays of the setting sun etching his sternly handsome profile in flame, a look of quiet content and pleased anticipation in his strangely colored eyes.

"And there," Kells remarked to Sheriff Walsh, "goes a man!"

"Uh-huh," the sheriff agreed soberly, "one of the reasons the Rangers are the *Rangers!* Let's go eat."


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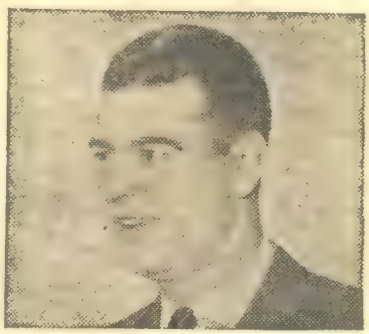

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# THE ROPE RIVER RUCKUS

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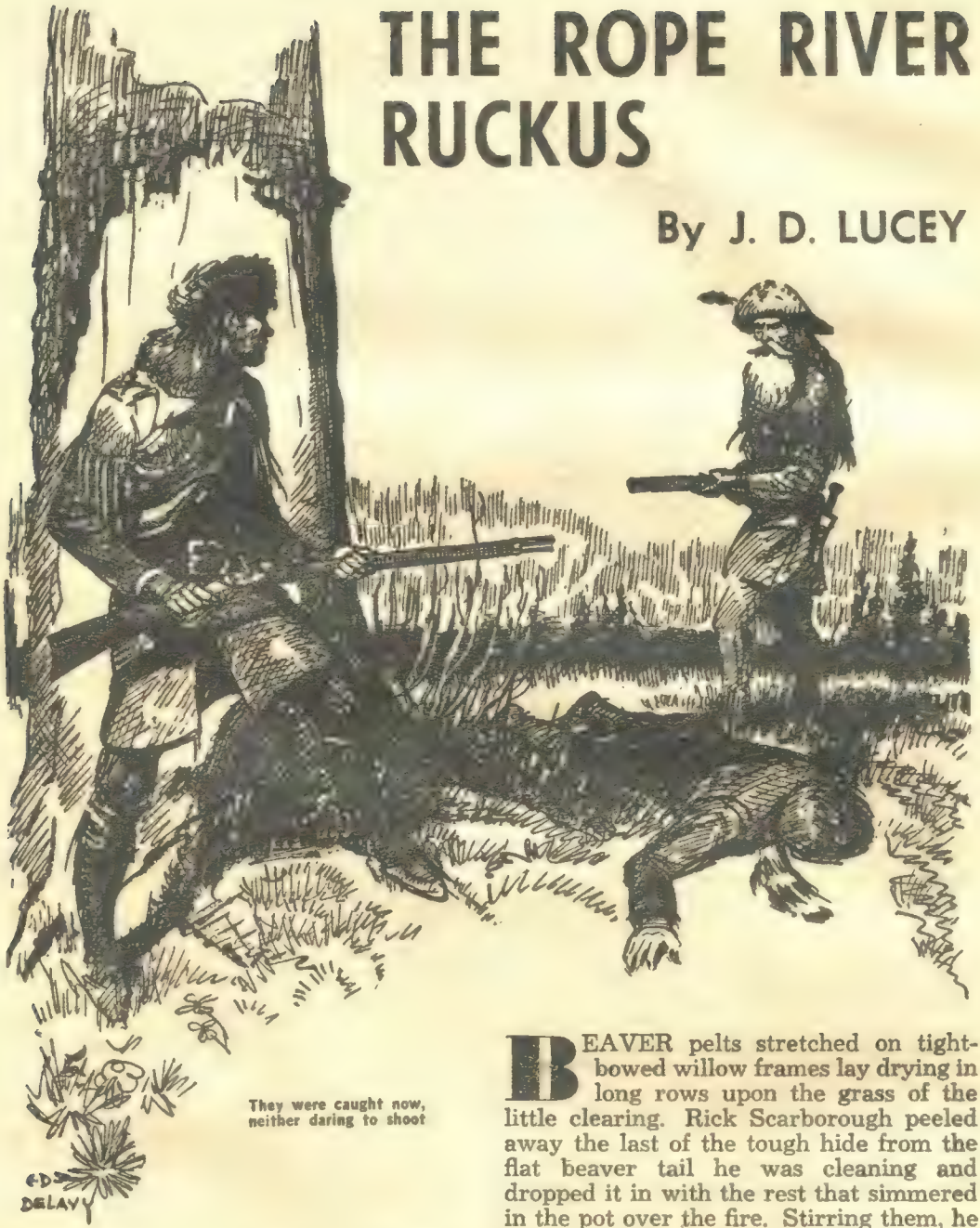


They were caught now, neither daring to shoot

*One of these mountain trappers was a sneaky killer—which one?*

BEAVER pelts stretched on tight-bowed willow frames lay drying in long rows upon the grass of the little clearing. Rick Scarborough peeled away the last of the tough hide from the flat beaver tail he was cleaning and dropped it in with the rest that simmered in the pot over the fire. Stirring them, he licked his lips, his mouth watering as every mountain-man's did at the prospect of rich beaver-tail meat for the night's meal.

He lifted a copper pot and headed for the narrow river and more water. From the pool at his feet, a tanned face gazed

back up at him, and he bent lower to study the stray wisps of black down that said he'd soon be a grown man. Maybe even have a real beard stretching down to his chest like Jeb White's gray one.

He laughed at the thought and jumped at the sudden sound it made in the stillness. He stood there, listening for any answering noises—the whisper of moccasins that could mean investigating Indians, a snapping twig that a curious grizzly might make.

A RUEFUL smile tugged at his lips as he realized he had a long way to go yet before the green rubbed off and he became a mountain man. He was just the camp swamper. He skinned the beaver, cooked the meals, tended the mules. But even so, such listening as he was doing now should be unconscious and more like second nature. It should be part of him, as it was with Indians and any other creature which meant to live beyond the Missouri.

An unconscious part of him said, "That blood in the stream's too much. Beaver paw blood couldn't make it." Without thought, he was moving up the bank, following the thin red rivulet that moved sluggishly along with the slow stream.

He stopped, considering this might be some Indian trick. It didn't always pay to investigate things, he knew that. After all, that was the way they trapped beaver, wasn't it? Getting them to investigate a smell.

Still, it was as Jeb was always telling him: "Happen you ain't sure whar the current's going, toss in your float stick and you'll know right quick." He listened, heard no sound, and moved softly forward.

He worked away from the river, not wanting to disturb the beaver up ahead. The cottonwoods were cool and dark, the quiet was bad. He edged wide around the area of beaver-thrown trees, checking the flint and the priming of his Hawken as he went. He came out upstream, saw there was no blood there.

Below, a blue jay spoke sharply, raising more ruckus than it should. Rick drifted down, soft moccasins making no sound on the resilient bank of the river. At the edge of the beaver pool, he hunkered low behind the tule grass.

Beaver stood like small dots down there on the dam, quiet and peering up at the tules. Only the kits were playing in the pool. The blue jay squawked again, suddenly shut up.

Rick glanced behind him, studying his back trail, then began inching forward. On the dam, a large, grayed "old man" beaver spotted him and whacked the water loudly with his tail. A sudden scampering followed and all the beaver disappeared.

Just within the edge of the tules, he found Matt Dunning lying face down in the pool. Matt still held a beaver trap in one hand, his rifle wasn't on his shoulder, and his throat was an ugly water-washed gash that stretched from jaw to jaw.

His hair hadn't been taken.

White man's work.

There was no trail leading in, so the man had come from the other side. Rick walked up to the end of the pool and sliding his feet over the rocky river bed, waded softly across. He stood on the rock ledge that lined the shore there, letting the water drip from the bottom of his clinging buckskins. It was a warm day, and the full length of rocks were dry.

Finally he found a shallow depression still half-filled with water from the murderer's pants. Near it was a cleft in the rocks and stuffed deep into that shadow were the man's wet moccasins.

Both were black. Teton Sioux. Made for large feet. A few strands of fresh grass were still in the toes where the man had stuffed them to fit his smaller feet. As you'd expect, the whole thing was smart. And it was this that made Rick breath so fast, for a white renegade was more to be feared than any Indian.

The sign was easy enough to read.

The renegade had put on the Sioux moccasins, left his own here, and crossed over to kill Matt. Returning, he'd wrung his pants out so they wouldn't drip, changed to his dry moccasins, and left. There'd be no trail, for the man would simply follow one of their own regular ones.

Matt Dunning had been the trouble maker, the man who always had something to say, who never let you live in peace. A man aching for what he'd got, all right. Still. . . .

Grabbing up his Hawken, Rick scrambled up the bank and trotted on up-trail,

taking little care about his nose now that he knew it wasn't Blackfeet. Jeb White would know what to do.

Jeb stoppered his castoreum horn and put off baiting the beaver trap.

"Had to make me a new scent stick," he grumbled. "T'other one disappeared." He waded slowly over to the cut-bank and looked up. "Trouble?"

"Matt's been killed."

Jeb squinted at him a moment, then lifted his tall rheumatic frame up onto the grass. He sat there, staring off across the river, and listened to Rick's story. He was an old man for a trapper and had kept his long, challenging hair because he was one of the best. He knew how to avoid Indian fights, knew how to fight them when he had to. Some said at those times he got too violent, his hatred making him kill with an Indian lust for killing. But if so, the hostiles learned and seldom tried for his scalp a second time.

When Rick was finished, he grunted, "Ain't likely it's the 'Opposition.' None of them boys 'round here. So it's one of us."

"But, Jeb—ain't any of us'd do that!"

Jeb laughed, his gruff voice heavy with irony. "Back in the States they call us White Injuns, don't they? Well, maybe we are."

He was silent for a while.

"Go up and get the rest of the boys. I'll go down and see Matt."

WHEN Scarborough reached camp with Billy Reynolds, Big John, and Pierre Gaudin, Jeb was angrily lifting the smoking pot off the fire.

Big John, the Delaware, lifted his nose, nostrils twitching as they'd been doing for the last mile. He shook his head and caught Rick's eye.

"Boy get all up-an-run. Get excite. Forget beaver-tail, make big stink. All animals smell it. Maybeso Injun. No good."

Rick flushed and strode angrily away from the big Indian. Hardly a day passed that some one of them didn't reprimand him for something. Maybe they expected him to turn Indian overnight? Well, he'd learn. But they didn't have to be in such a hurry about it, did they?

He drew his Green River knife, grabbed up more beaver-tails, slashed at them so violently that he almost cut himself. He paused, realizing once more that their lives depended on him as well as themselves. He remembered what the big Delaware had told him once, that there were only about fifteen hundred mountain men, that every month about ten of them died. Because they relaxed for half a minute. Maybe that was how Matt got it.

But you had to trust *someone*, didn't you?

Jeb White sat down cross-legged, leaning back against his possibles sack.

"Rendezvous next month," he said. "Had a good season. Maybe too good." He drew his pipe from the heart-shaped and bead-decorated pipe holder slung around his neck, stuffed it with his rank smelling shongsha mixture.

The others looked at him, looked away. They thought about what he'd said: They had an easy six-thousand dollars' worth of plews. Divided six ways—a sixth for each and the last sixth split between Rick and Jeb, who was the outfit's boosh-way—that was a thousand dollars for each. But now it'd be divided five ways. If another went . . . four.

Rick forced the last beaver-tail onto the ramrod he was using as a skewer and glanced at the silent man. He saw Jeb suddenly frown and lay his rifle across his knees.

"What you doing, Gaudin?" Jeb demanded.

Pierre Gaudin's fat face didn't change. He went on rapidly rolling up his bedroll. His possibles sack was already tied and ready.

"I said, what you doing?"

Pierre jerked around. His eyes were wide and his tongue licked twice at his lower lip before he spoke. His usually soft voice was shrill:

"*Sacré enfant*, this it no is good! Me, I go to sleep in bush. In the morning I pack. By gar, Pierre go to the rendezvous!"

"Ain't no one of us leaving, Gaudin."

"Nossir, you kin lay to that," Billy Reynolds' high-pitched voice chimed in. "You think we're gonna let you go on the prairie whar there ain't no way of telling whar you're at or if maybeso you're looking for our hair?"

Pierre stood there, a rawhide thong twisting over and over in his hands and his small dark eyes jerking from one to the other of the watching men.

"This is worse'n Indzians!" he burst out.

Billy Reynolds patted the long barrel of his Hawken, a lopsided grin on his narrow face.

"Happen you don't like it, I got a half ounce of Galena says you'll be gone beaver."

Jeb's voice cut across the fire. "Easy, Reynolds." He waited till Billy again laid his rifle by his knee, then went on, gruff and calm as ever, "Ain't none of us leaving sight of the rest, Pierre."

Gaudin's eyes blazed. His hands were pulling so hard at the thong in his rage that they trembled. Finally, he turned from Jeb, shrugging. As he unrolled the buffalo robes, they could hear him softly cursing to himself in the slurring patois of the French trappers.

BIG JOHN lay back, hands under head, and studied the first stars. Jeb was busy watching his smoke clouds drift away in the breeze from the river. Pierre Gaudin sat down, rested his pudgy face on one hand, and stared into the depths of the fire. Billy Reynolds scratched his thin nose, smiled for no reason Rick could see, and drew his Hawken closer. No one of them looked at any of the others.

Billy dug a handful of cherry pemmican out of a parfleche. Nibbling on it, he glanced around, eyes darting squirrel-like from face to face. He laughed suddenly.

"Blackfoot country, this is. Mighty handy people, them Blackfeet. Maybe you think them Injuns won't leave one of us with his sculp so he can lead them mules back to rondyvous? Yep, the boys, they sure'll be sad to hear how them dirty Blackfeet done killed their pals. Maybe you think they won't be giving the man plenty o' Sublette's rotten whiskey and tellin' him what a lucky cuss he is? Yessir, and smart, too, to get himself away from all them Blackfeet." Billy leaned back, laughing loudly, suddenly stopped.

Big John stirred restlessly. "Why he no sculpum?" he asked. "Make Injun do it?"

Rick Scarborough placed more wood under the roasting beaver-tails, then asked, "Reckon he was in too much of a hurry, Jeb?"

"Ain't no reason for him to've hurried himself." Jeb knocked the pipe out against a calloused palm, slow, deliberate. He added: "Maybeso he *wanted* it to look like one of us done it."

"Don't make no sense," Billy decided.

"Say, Jeb," Rick offered excitedly, "if it was a Blackfoot—a lone buck—and he didn't want us chasing after him, why then he might've done it that way and—"

The indulgent glint in Jeb's smile stopped him. Billy laughed so hard he almost choked on the pemmican. And Pierre went on studying the angry red coals of the fire.

Jeb said, "No Injun'd let a sculp go if he could help it." His hands fingered the scalps that fringed the legs of his buckskin finished wool pants. "Neither'd any of us if we'd killed a Injun. Matter of pride, and to show we're as good as them. Same thing with a Injun."

"That right, boy." Big John sat up. "You kill Injun, takum hair. Don't gotta keep it, gotta take." He picked up their drinking cup, shouldered his Hawken, and went down to the river.

"Jeb?"

"Yeah, Rick."

"How 'bout him?"

Pierre Gaudin jerked up straight. "*Qui*," he demanded softly, "why not the Beeg Jzohn, eh?"

"Been with me a couple years," Jeb White said. "Figger we're friends." He began tamping a new load of kinnikinic in the pipe, frowning as he worked. "He's a Delaware. Tribe's all busted up. Every Injun's his enemy. Whites is his only friends. So you kin trust Delawares."

"Sure, but—"

"Yeah," Billy Reynolds cut in, "you think Big John ain't smart?"

"You mean leaving the sculp like ain't nowise natural for him?" Jeb considered that, at last shook his head. He lifted himself up, drew a simmering beaver-tail from the skewer. He raised it to his mouth, mountain fashion, the fat gravy running down over his hands, and tore off a large chunk. He stood there, grinning at them. "One of us did it."

The fire was low and Rick lay in the circle around it staring up at the sky, keeping awake by waiting for the cloud to uncover the moon again. They were all awake, he could feel that, afraid as he was, to go to sleep. Noiselessly, he lifted his buffalo robe, slid his rifle outside where the robe couldn't interfere. He held his finger curved around the trigger, his

thumb on the hammer.

His left hand was growing moist and clammy around the handle of his knife. He tried to shake off his fear, couldn't do it. He made himself think about that moon up there, and at last his mind drifted away, telling him of the moon back home.

Mom dying so long ago he hardly remembered. Then Dad when the Big Muddy flooded so bad last year. Old Dolph Jackson, the printer that Dad had apprenticed him out to. The day he'd got fed up and finished with Dolph's way of making a slave of him instead of teaching him the work and letting him keep his eagerness to learn it.

THE moon sifted its slow way out of the trailing cloud. All the thrills and fears of the night he'd run away from Dolph came back, and he watched himself arguing with the river-barge men till they gave in. The sweat and labor of the voyage north, the first Indians, Fort Leavenworth, and again arguing till Jeb shrugged and let him join his party.

There'd been Indian scares aplenty, and that mad wolf that Big John killed before it could burst into camp on them. But nothing like this. This was what scared you. Not daring to sleep because there was no one you could trust. The moon disappeared again and waiting for it, he went to sleep.

Soon after, he woke, sat up and looked around. Then he remembered. He jerked out his knife, placed it handle down against his possibles sack so its point would jab his cheek if his head rolled and again started to sleep.

Big John was sitting tall by the fire, his shadow a weird flickering thing that stretched over the clearing. The Delaware had the fat little deerskin bag from under his shirt in one hand, and he carefully packed the objects he'd taken from it back into the bag.

Some medicine ritual, Rick decided, and not wanting to disturb him started to lie down, his robe scraping lightly against him with the movement.

Big John looked around, face blank. Then he grinned. "Make medicine strong again. Now no can kill."

A voice said, "Wanta fix mine up for me, too?" Billy Reynolds' voice.

The Indian spread his hands, shrugging that he couldn't.

"Don't do no harm to wear them things, I reckon," Billy went on. "Been wearing mine for a long spell. Snake gal give it to me. My, my she was purty. She said it. . ." his voice trailed off, they heard him turning over.

The Indian stood up, moved out of the firelight. Rick lay down again, waiting for the dawn now. Some other waiter stirred restlessly in his blankets. The wind changed, brought him the soft sound of even breathing, some one of them sound asleep. Far off up a side canyon a lion howled its kill.

They sat around camp all day, no one going out to trap. They repaired traps and moccasins and kept their hands occupied so they didn't have to look up and see the watchful face of a comrade.

At night, it was the same thing again, no one sleeping. And the night after that, until they were haggard and edgy and had to move slowly because their muscles were giving out. Whatever the murderer's plan had been—maybe just to even some old score against Matt—they'd given him a new one now, a faster one. And they all knew he had to follow it.

Pierre Gaudin said it first. They were sitting there, watching him put a fresh flint in the hammer of his rifle until, startled, he looked up and realized he'd been preparing a weapon. He put the gun down fast. His small eyes shuttled back and forth from the rifle to the still eyes of the men.

"Well? What else to do? *Sacré enfant mais* I neveair so scairt as dis time!" His fat little face squeezed up tightly and he looked away. Pudgy hands were suddenly busy again with the flint. "We no find who kill Matty, we fight each othair, *non?*" He was muttering it now, half to himself, half for them. "No to trust me," he explained, "so me the same *avec* you. Kill."

"Him right," Big John grunted.

No one said anything for a long time, not even Billy. The prospect of having to kill each other off just to get the one man they feared tied a cold knot in Rick's stomach. They all looked sick.

The little Canadian was too scared, Rick decided, so it couldn't be he. Jeb White? No, he had no reason. Besides, Jeb was the best man in the whole bunch and the

only one he could call a friend. To the rest, he was just the camp swamper and a tenderfoot, at that.

He glanced at the Indian. Maybe like Jeb said, you could trust these Delawares. Still . . . he was Indian, wasn't he?

Billy, he decided. Billy Reynolds talked too much, was always getting into arguments with Matt and Matt had always made trouble for Billy. So if it were Billy, he'd pick Matt Dunning as the first to die, wouldn't he?

His puzzled gaze swung to Big John, caught the man looking at him with the same puzzlement his own eyes held. Big John's face became bland, looked him over quietly, and the eyes swung slowly away and rested on Gaudin.

This can't go on, Rick thought. Eyeing each other like a bunch of wolves coming up on their kill. His heavy-lidded eyes closed and his head snapped forward, waking him. He forced the gravelly lids up again, stared slowly around. So it was going to be another day of it, sitting here and waiting and hoping you'd live through the night.

BILLY didn't.

In the morning the wooden handle of a trade knife was sticking up out of his chest. The blood was dry and several hours old and the body had started to stiffen in the pre-dawn cold.

They looked down at him, silent, each knowing that only one man had managed to stay awake, and all except one wondering why it had been Billy Reynolds instead of himself.

Pierre Gaudin edged away from the group. Seeing him, Jeb White stepped back. Then Big John. Rick still stood there, leaning on his rifle, and staring down at the body of Billy Reynolds. The man's mouth was open slightly and his eyelids, leaving three points of white to cut the slatey color of his face. The robe covered one hand, the other was half out of sight, gripped tightly on the handle of his knife.

Rick turned away, found himself the center of the suspicious circle, hastily stepped out of it. They stood there, the four of them, each man's eyes drifting to lock with another's, then on to lock for a briefer moment with the next man's.

They'd all liked Billy Reynolds despite his windy talk. But there was no time to feel sorry for him. Survival was what counted now.

"The killer? Or just someone with Pierre's idea?"

The voice sliced through the silence, startled them. And it wasn't till he found them staring at him that he realized the fatigue, the silence, the constant waiting had made him think out loud.

"Take a Injun to creep up on a man that's expecting it like Billy was," Jeb muttered. His hands on the rifle clenched and he glanced up quickly. "Didn't mean that. Not thataway, Big John."

But the Delaware had already stepped out of the circle, gun half-raised and still carefully pointed at none of them.

"Any one of us could've done it," Jeb went on, " 'Cept maybe the kid. He couldn't've been so quiet that one of us wouldn'ta heered him at it."

Pierre studied Rick a moment, shrugged and turned back to watch Big John.

Rick Scarborough lifted his rifle, held it, like the others, swung across his spread legs. His mouth felt dry and parched, his eyes were wide and angry. There was an edgy feel to his hands, and maybe they were shaking against the cool steel of the Hawken. But when he spoke, his voice was low, had a firmness to it he'd never heard himself before.

"I'm tossing my float stick in." They didn't seem to have heard him. "The wrong man was killed this time."

Their eyes came to him, slow, waiting.

"Man who comes into rendezvous with all these plews and a tale about Injuns, he's going to *have* to be believed. *Has* to know they'll believe him before he starts getting rid of folks."

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the Delaware nod slowly and his gun begin to swing toward the man.

"Outfoxed himself is what he did."

Pierre rasped softly, "Keed no make sense."

Jeb's voice was heavy. "He makes sense." He stepped back and farther toward the fire away from Gaudin. "Go on, Rick."

He wished he hadn't said anything. Wished there was some way out. But they'd been awake too long and the murderer'd been sleeping. They'd all be dead come morning. His thumb jiggled with

the hammer, wanting to cock it and not daring to yet. If he could make the man try to kill again. . . .

He looked at these men he'd called his friends, and suddenly—standing there with that smell of death heavy on the cool morning air—something changed in him and he straightened and the last of his boyishness slipped away.

"Matt Dunning they'd have trusted at rendezvous. They all knew him. They'd have believed Billy, though maybe," Scarborough smiled, "he'd have had to do a sight more talking than even he was used to. But they knew Billy."

"Know us, all us they know," Pierre smiled.

"No. Not as friends they don't, not all of us. You're a Canadian, been with Hudson's Bay, and you know how we all like that outfit."

"*Qui!* The keed he right! Nevair would they to believe Pierre Gaudin!"

"I'm just a swamper. They don't know me from Adam's off ox. Won't trust me for a spell even when they do know more about me."

HE pulled in his breath and drew the gun up to his waist. He stared across the camp into the calm blue eyes of Jeb White. "That leaves you, Jeb, and Big John. And no matter how much of a friend they think Big John is, he's still an Injun."

"Well," Jeb commented, "that's a mighty interesting yarn you got." He smiled. "Now, boy, 'spose you leave the figuring to us and rustle up a meal. After that, you kin help dig the grave."

"Yeh, keed no make sense. I say so before. Why Jzeb do eet, eh? Jzeb he one good man."

"Yeah, he's just fine," Rick came back. "Getting a little old for trapping and he's always spent his dollars fast as he makes them. Time to retire, buy himself a farm or maybe a trading post. Huh, Jeb? But he's got to have money to do that, lots of money. Can't get it without killing us for all them pretty beaver plews."

Jeb's face was growing red and angry. "Boy! I told you to fix our meal!"

"Fix your own meat."

"If you warn't so young it'd be rifles at twenty paces for you, Scarborough!" Jeb laid his gun on the ground, grabbed up a hunk of firewood. He came at Rick with it, club raised. "You gonna do as I say or you gonna get this across your back?"

Rick Scarborough spread his feet, bracing himself. His foot tangled in the edge of Billy Reynolds' buffalo robe. He glanced down quickly, saw his foot pull the robe away from Billy's hand, saw the fingers that were stained a greenish-black.

"Better go pick up that rifle, Jeb. Might be you'll need it."

Jeb White's fierce old eyes blazed up, slowly simmered down. Laughter wrinkles deepened as he smiled.

"Look, boy, I'm your booshway. You've got to do as I say or it's go it alone. 'Sides, you're all mixed up about how things are. You know that, don't you?"

Stubbornly, Rick shook his head, feeling sure now that he'd muffed it. "Wish I did, Jeb." He turned, pointed down at the dead Billy Reynolds' hand. "See that, Jeb? That tarry-lookin' stuff on his fingers?"

"Never mind that now. You go fix our meat and think some about what you've been saying. Afore I do anything, I want you to have a chance to change your mind, Rick."

"What's he talk 'bout now?" Pierre came over, peering down at the corpse.

Ignoring Jeb, Rick turned to the fat little Canadian. "You use straight castoreum for bait, Pierre. So did Reynolds. Big John put something in his to medicine it up, makes it sorta brown. That's beaver bait on Reynolds' hand. He got hold of the bait horn on the killer's belt, got his fingers gummed up with the stuff 'round the stopper. And it's sorta black. Like from that licorice weed Jeb doctors his up with so it'll stink better."

Jeb's club swung in a wide, vicious arc. Rick threw himself aside, tried to get under it. The heavy cottonwood limb *thucked* above his ear. Grass came rushing up at him.

*This was all wrong! It wasn't to be like this!*

A wide, distorted figure snatched a long pole up from beside him, straightened high, then disappeared behind him. His hands pushed hard against the ground, raised him up. His eyes were out of kilter and he had to wait for them to make sense out of the green blur he was looking at.

The green in front of his face became a

mass of sharp spikes. He watched them change into soft looking grass, and he wanted to lie down in it and sleep. But the thumping roar came up close to his ears, went inside and started beating its way back out.

At last he managed to look up. Jeb stood in front of him and the long pole had been his own rifle. Held waist high, it pointed somewhere over his head.

The thumping roar tom-tommed it at him: *You muffed it.*

From behind, came a deep-chested brave grunt. Then again, challenging loud and angry:

*"Wagh!"*

Looking back, he saw Big John's angry face and the rifle that was centered on Jeb. Their positions, their faces told the story. Both had tried to shoot the other first, both had held their triggers in time. They were caught now, neither daring to shoot, for each knew the other would kill before he died.

PIERRE was dancing around on fat legs, hollering over his shoulder, "Beeg Jzohn! Get 'way!" He held his Hawken at an uncertain aim on Jeb White. But he couldn't shoot either, for Jeb would still kill Big John.

You couldn't work your way behind Jeb, Rick knew that. Jeb was too good a shot and no matter what you tried the big Delaware was going to die.

The brave grunt of the grizzly came again. *"Wa-a-agh!"*

"Stop it, Big John!" Rick yelled. "No sense in your dyin'. Let him go."

But the Indian was panting so loud Rick could hear his angry gasps all the way across the clearing. And he suddenly realized the Delaware had worked himself up too far, that he couldn't stop now, too much pride and honor were involved.

Rick stood up, putting himself between their Hawkens.

Jeb gave him a curious half-smile, then yelled, "Ary of you move and I kill this here kid!"

Jeb backed away slowly to the clearing's edge, keeping his rifle trained on Rick, keeping Rick between himself and the rifle of Big John. He came to the first willows, halted. Now, none of them dared move. They were stuck.

Rick's mouth felt dry and hot, and he couldn't seem to get enough air in his lungs. "Toss your float stick," Jeb had always told him, "and see where the current's going." Sure, he thought, toss it. Accuse Jeb just to see if the other one tries killing him before Jeb shows you're wrong. Hadn't figured maybe it was Jeb, after all, had you? Pulled another fool stunt, and now you're going to die for it.

Well, he tried telling himself, hell's full of greenhorns. You'll have plenty of fool friends.

He glanced around, spotted Pierre Gaudin still hopping from one excited foot to the other, the only man of them that was free to do as he wished. And the last of them that dared to shoot, for his bullet in Jeb would make sure that Rick at least, automatically died.

Pierre Gaudin stood still, staring at them, a thick smile growing on his face. He raised his gun, coolly aiming at Jeb.

It was clear now, clear as float sticks pointing to beaver. Rick whirled, wildly trying to signal Big John.

But the Delaware already knew, was shifting aim.

Behind Rick, Jeb's shot blasted the air, blending its roar with Big John's. Rick turned, saw Pierre Gaudin's rifle fly from his broken hand, his head fall forward, his knees unbend; saw him crumpling, slow and loose, to the grass.

Jeb White slid his ramrod out for a reload. "Guessed what you was doing, Rick, but I shore wish you'd made it some clearer to Big John." He let out a shaky, laughing, "Wagh!"

"Yeah," Rick said weakly, "Yeah."

"Boy plan?" Big John asked.

Jeb nodded.

"Heap smart." Big John walked away to stand leaning on his smoking rifle and staring blank-faced down at the body of the murderer.

"Think Big John suspicioned what you meant when you said you was tossing in the float stick. But he warn't nowise sure. Got him in a fighting mood, had himself all set to kill me if Pierre didn't make his play pretty quick. Owe you a lot for standing up atween us thataway, Rick."

Big John's deep voice rumbled across the clearing. "Boy, he smart. No good you clubum, Jeb. Him no have time tell Big John. Injun gotta figger from beaver bait."

Rick was still drawing in long breaths of air. He'd played it too close, greenhorn close. He held his hands clenched tight at his sides so Jeb wouldn't see the way reaction was shaking them.

Jeb smiled.

"Took things away from you a mite too soon, didn't I?"

"Yeah. Thanks, though, Jeb." The old man hadn't realized in time that Big John didn't understand yet that Jeb tried to knock him out so he wouldn't get killed in the ruckus that was to follow.

"How'd you know it war that Pierre?"

"He was the scaredest, but he slept the first night. Every night, few hours before dawn, he'd get some sleep. No one else dared to."

Big John shook his head. "Injun no notice."

"He slept mighty quiet. We was all sleeping far apart, and it was only 'cause he was on my side of the fire that I heard it."

Rick Scarborough frowned down at his moccasins. He had to ask it, and a cold knot of dread filled his chest. Afraid of the answer, afraid of the gun Jeb had finished reloading, he said: "Jeb, that beaver bait. How—?"

Jeb gave him a slow grin.

Deep, heavy chuckles came from Big John. "Boy no so smart!" Then he leaned back, laughing loudly.

Rick looked at them, began to smile himself. A puzzled smile, and still a little worried.

"Jeb no wear belt come night!" Big John roared.

A great wave of relief flooded over him, then he was laughing as loud as they were. Of course, Jeb didn't wear his belt! Why, no man could lie down comfortably with a whetstone, a knife and a castoreum horn hanging on him.

Still chuckling, Jeb said, "Musta been Pierre stole my scent stick that day. Used it on Billy's hand to make you boys think I'd done the knifing."

Big John suddenly sobered and, Indian-like, gestured largely with one hand at the body on the grass. "He no go rend'vous. Pierre go Hudson Bay. They believe *him*."

They nodded.

Big John walked over to Rick. He put one hand on his shoulder, gripping it hard, and his dark expressionless eyes fixed on Rick's.

"Boy, you want be trappa?"

Rick Scarborough tried to speak, couldn't, nodded.

"You no swamp. Big John make you good trappa. Like Injun."

"Durn betcha!" Jeb White declared.

Staring at them, it came to him that their harsh way with him these past months had been because he was so green. They'd been watching him, waiting to see if he'd prove himself. But now they were his friends. They'd make him a Mountain Man!

He smiled, and found himself suddenly grinning happily into their still calm, studying eyes.

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LONG SAM RIDES SOUTH

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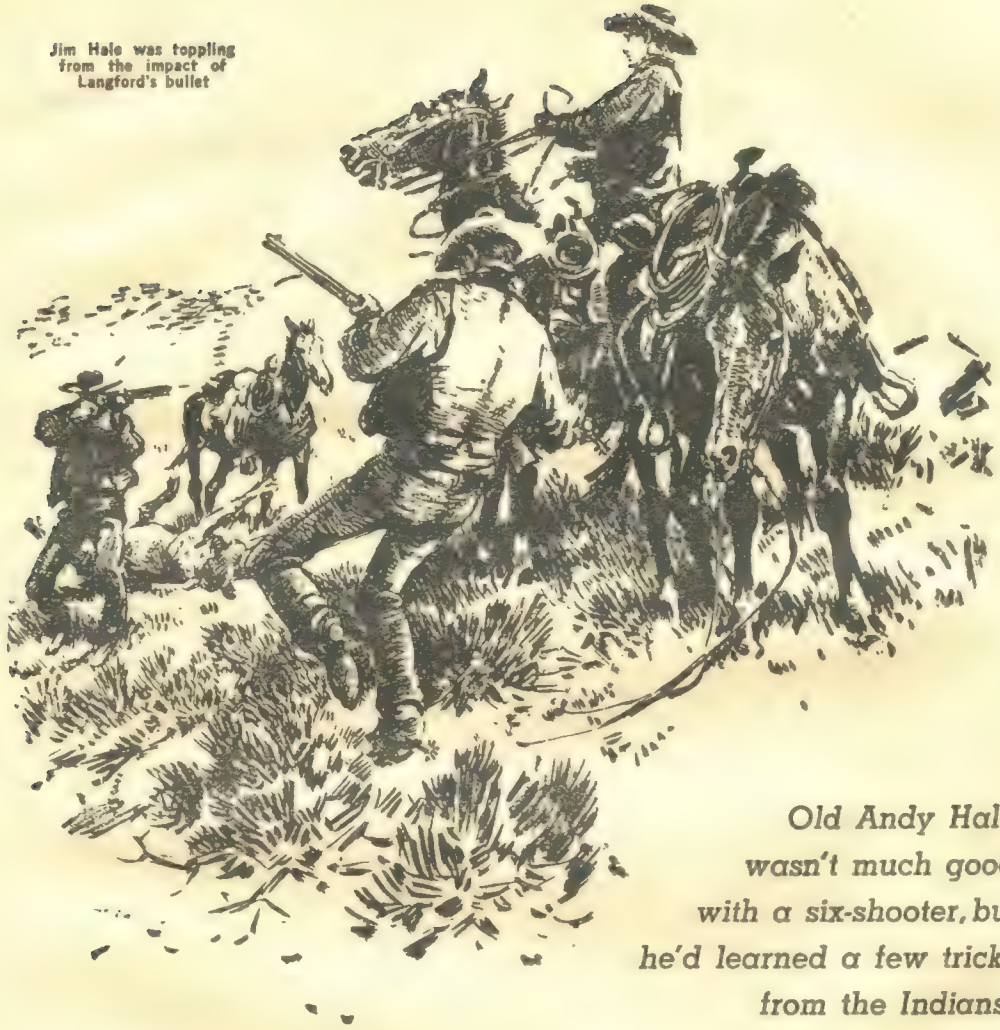


Jim Hale was toppling from the impact of Langford's bullet

*Old Andy Hale wasn't much good with a six-shooter, but he'd learned a few tricks from the Indians!*

# RELIC REAPER

## By CLIFF WALTERS

IF FATE had been kind she would have whispered some hint of her dark secret that May morning. Then sturdy, iron-gray Brock Naylor and his partner, young Jim Hale, would have ridden much more cautiously into the stone-walled mouth of the little coulee in upper Antler Valley. Now, before they knew it, they were within fifty feet of a man ground-butchering one of their few yearling steers.

All three men turned to statues for a moment. Then the butcher, a big-raw-boned man with a slanting brow that pro-

truded over deep-set eyes, made a leap for his carbine that lay only a few feet from him.

Almost at the same instant Jim Hale, a young six-footer, slid off his bay horse and yanked his old rifle from its saddle-boot. A flood of dread surged over Brock, who carried no gun. He knew that his young partner, playing a desperate hand, wouldn't be the first to pull trigger. Time was against Jim Hale.

The barrel of "Ledge" Langford's quickly raised gun glinted in the sunlight as Brock, voicing a yell, dug spurs into his sorrel horse. A shot burst from Langford's carbine. Jim Hale didn't get to pull the trigger of his own half-raised weapon. Jim Hale was toppling to the ground under the impact of Langford's bullet, which had torn through his chest.

Brock's sorrel was bounding forward, Brock was flinging himself upon big, raw-boned Ledge Langford before the latter could shift his gun enough to fire a second shot.

Both men hit the ground in a tangle of arms and legs, with Langford, fighting with the fierceness of an attacked grizzly, coming up on top as the tangled pair rolled over. A big fist flattened Brock's left ear against his head. A heavy knee felt as if it were going to push through him and stake him to the earth.

But Brock was stocky, if only five-feet nine in height. He twisted violently to escape the punishment he was taking. He tipped the man, now astride him, to one side. He pounded a hard blast to Langford's long nose. And another still harder.

Spurs dug the grassy turf of a coulee where gun echoes were rippling away into distance. One of Langford's spurs ripped the leg of Brock's overalls and brought blood. Brock's right spur tore at Langford. His big right hand vised around the butcher's throat, held there with the tenacity of a bulldog's teeth.

Langford weakened. His breath was wheezing, now. Yet, with a desperate lunge, he broke the hold on his throat. But strong as he was, he had lost his advantage over his furious antagonist. Brock hammered and kicked. He upset Langford, smashed him with a crashing blow to the nose again.

Ledge Langford struggled and fought, but he couldn't stem the tide. Brock, older but bull-stout, wouldn't be denied. His blazing dark eyes glanced at Jim Hale, lying crumpled a few feet away, and Brock's fists thudded with a viciousness that no man could withstand. He slugged and hammered until his antagonist went limp and plunged into the abyss of unconsciousness.

Then Brock staggered over to Jim Hale and gasped, "Jim! Are you hurt bad?"

"Yeah," Jim choked. "Tell Dad— But you savvy. Thanks, pard, for tearing Langford apart. I hope they'll hang—the range-butchering—"

That was all Jim Hale said. Brock glanced at Langford, and fought another battle with himself. He wanted to get his hand on Langford's throat again, both hands, and choke the life out of the murderer. But because he was strong of will as well as muscle, Brock Naylor conquered the torrent of hate surging through him. Grief, however, he could not shake off. He had been fond of the clean, decent, hard-working young man who had been his partner.

THREE days later thin, mild old Andy Hale, a widowed schoolmaster who had long taught in the southern part of Nevada, stepped off the train in the little town of Squaw Lodge and silently shook hands with Brock Naylor.

"I'm mighty sorry about the way things turned out for Jim, Mr. Hale," Brock said in a low voice. "Naturally, he wanted you to have his part of our little spread—which don't amount to much, even for all the work we've put in on it."

"It's a pretty spot, Antler Valley," said Andy Hale. "Perhaps, after the shock of this awful tragedy has worn off, I'll find it a good place to live. Not that I'm a rancher, Brock. I've made my living the only way I could—teaching school."

"Jim sure appreciated them little checks you sent him," Brock answered. "We had pretty tough sledding after we put our two homesteads together and tried making the start of a cow spread in Antler Valley."

"Where's this Langford murderer now?" Andy asked.

"In jail, here in town. His trial comes up next week. If they don't hang that snake, it won't be because my testimony won't help!"

"If justice is done, he'll be sentenced to death," said Andy Hale. "And, surely, there's no reason why it shouldn't be done."

When Andy Hale made that remark, he was overlooking several factors. Ledge Langford, a wayward son who had left his home, had a wealthy father—a cattleman over in Big Trails County—and a very devoted mother who, for the past five years, had been begging her reckless son to return home. The best criminal lawyer in the state was hired by the Langfords for the defense of their only son. The district attorney, a man whose thirst was stronger than his legal ability, was more of a politician than a bulwark of the law.

The trial was an ordeal for Brock Naylor and Andy Hale, a dismaying exhibition of legal skill over justice. Although Brock told the truth, and only the truth, in his testimony, Ledge Langford's able and highly paid attorney was a keen-eyed fox uncovering every loophole. The gray-maned, impressive-looking man was extremely adroit. And in his final plea to the jury, he was masterfully eloquent.

He contended that if death had resulted from gunfire, there had been no malicious intent to commit murder. In his opinion Charles "Ledge" Langford, the defendant, was guilty of nothing more than killing wild game out of season—game he had been selling to a railroad grading camp some forty miles away.

Langford, the attorney said, had *accidentally* killed a steer while shooting at a bull elk, and had attempted to salvage the meat. Then Brock Naylor and Jim Hale had appeared. Young Jim had drawn a gun—

"Ledge Langford went for his gun first!" Brock cut in, then.

The judge rapped for order, and the defense attorney went on smoothly, "I think, gentlemen, that Charles Langford has suffered enough. I ask you to look at the defendant, to bear witness to the results of the unmerciful beating which one of his two assailants gave him."

"They were not assailants!" cried old Andy Hale. "They were honest homesteaders!"

Again the judge rapped for order.

"Behold the defendant's nose!" the attorney resumed. "Broken, battered, twisted off to one side! He is disfigured for life! And all because his enemy, Brock Naylor, says—"

"Excuse me while I hold my own nose, and get out!" interrupted Andy Hale, rising.

"Another outbreak from either you or Brock Naylor and I shall hold you both in contempt of court!" roared the irate judge.

LEDGE LANGFORD'S parents hadn't wasted their money. The defendant was sentenced only to a brief term in the county jail. Brock and old Andy Hale, smoldering with bitterness, went home to Antler Valley in the creaking old wagon that had hauled the logs for two homestead cabins.

Following a remote, winding road, the wagon was laboring into the foothills of the Antler Mountains when Andy Hale, rousing himself from dark silence, said, "Is there still lots of wild game in Antler Valley, Brock?"

"Plenty! Too much for right good feed, sometimes," Brock answered.

"I was talking to an old-timer who used to trap up here," Andy went on. "I guess the place you and Jim homesteaded was a favorite hunting ground of the Indians once."

"I guess so," Brock said. "I see quite a few arrowheads around."

"Good!" Andy exclaimed. "That's a hobby of mine, collecting Indian relics. I've got quite a few items in my old trunk here. The old-timer I talked to mentioned a knoll in the middle of the valley. He said there had been quite an Indian battle there, many years ago. The Crows, it seemed, were hunting in the valley when a big party of Arapahoes came along for the same purpose."

"Heard something about that once, but never paid much attention," Brock said. "Jim and me have been too busy to do anything but work. A fine harvest he reaped for all his work! That trial!"

"Let's try not to think about it too much —pardner," said Andy. He forced a smile and added, "You've got enough on your hands now, trying to turn a range schoolmaster into a cowboy."

"There ain't much cowboying," Brock said. "Just the little old dab of cattle that Jim and me have been able to rake together."

As time passed, Brock was glad not to

be alone in the cabin where he and Jim had lived for the past year. Old Andy, now a half owner in the outfit, was agreeable company, even if he wasn't much help. The ex-schoolmaster didn't know anything about cooking. Nor did he know much about digging post holes and stringing barbed wire, or handling livestock. Brock did most of the work, with his new partner helping as best he could.

It was Andy Hale's love of Indian relics that began to disturb Brock more and more. When the two men rode together, keeping an eye on the few head of cattle they ran, Andy was forever watching the ground with his mild blue eyes. He had found a dozen arrowheads to add to the collection he already possessed. He had found a moss agate hide-scraper, a beautiful spearhead and a war club. Thus his interest had become whetted to a sharp edge.

Brock drove the wagon to Squaw Lodge one day to get some groceries and rock salt. It was late when he returned, but there was no supper ready. Old Andy had the kitchen table littered with an array of Indian relics. Tired and hungry, Brock looked hard at him.

"It's nearly dark," he growled. "You'd better get that junk off the table and start getting supper, hadn't you?"

"Supper?" Andy echoed. "It is late, isn't it? Time goes so fast when I'm occupied with these things."

Brock wanted to say, "You'd better get occupied with something besides old Indian junk if you want to keep on being a pard in this part of a spread!" But the tight-lipped man kept silent.

BROCK, the next morning, was shoeing the bay horse that Jim had ridden. Andy, unable to do any of the hard work, was trying to hold the restive animal, when a rancher who lived five miles away—gangling Bert Chapman—rode up and said, "Howdy!"

Brock grunted and went on with his shoeing.

Chapman, a weak-chinned man, shifted uneasily in his saddle and said, "Seen anything of a stray horse on your range, Brock? A brown saddle horse, branded with an AZ on his left thigh?"

"Nope," Brock grunted, sweating over the hoof he was rasping down.

"You're pretty short with visitors," said gangling Burt Chapman.

"Why don't you go and see if you can get on another jury, Chapman?" Brock said, straightening up. "You and them eleven other spineless coyotes, lettin' that shyster lawyer, hired by the Langfords, hypnotize you! Either that, or else the rich Langford layout bribed you!"

Chapman's weak mouth twitched. "Now, hold on, Brock! I know you're sore about the outcome of that trial, but us fellers on the jury—"

"You fellers on the jury!" Brock echoed, dark eyes blazing. "You turned a murdering coyote loose, after I'd told the truth about him! He's outa jail already! I hope he range-butchers one of your critters, and that you ride up on him when he's doing it! Then you'll know what Ledge Langford is, if you live to tell it. Get out, Chapman! Keep your stray horses off this range. And yourself, too!"

The gangling rider wheeled his horse and rode away.

"Is Langford out of jail, Brock?" old Andy Hale said then.

"Yeah," his partner said angrily, and grabbed up a hoof. "But he didn't go home to his parents, like they'd hoped he would. Langford's on the loose, fancy-free like he was before he killed Jim. If he ever shows up here again, and I get my hands on him, he won't be setting around smirking in any more courtrooms!"

At the dinner table that noon, a dinner cooked by Brock, Andy said, "I wish we could buy some more cattle, Brock. You mentioned the other day that you'd like to buy a really fine Whiteface bull."

"Let's stop dreaming," Brock said bitterly. "What little money Jim and me had saved up, from breaking broncs, went for funeral expenses. I guess I could break some alone, if somebody'd let me have them. But I'm no kid any more—not young like Jim was. And I've got to mow and stack the wild hay down on the meadow. Can you look after the cattle while I'm mowing?"

"I'll try," Andy said meekly.

At daybreak one morning Brock went to town to buy a part for the old mowing machine. It was noon when, agitated, he returned from his quick trip. But there was no dinner ready. Andy Hale was gone.

At three o'clock in the afternoon Andy still hadn't returned. Brock swore in anger and saddled up his horse and rode up the valley. There had been a heavy rain last night. Maybe Andy's horse had slipped and fallen with him.

Brock was riding past the cedared knoll in the middle of Antler Valley when he heard a horse nicker. He swerved his sorrel off the trail and rode up the side of the knoll. There he saw Andy.

"Look, Brock!" Andy called excitedly. "That old trapper I talked to was right! There *was* a battle here! And after that rain of last night, look at the arrowheads I've found. Dozens of them! Look at this one, a perfect speciman! The Indian who made this one was a master craftsman! Isn't it a big beauty? I'd like to tip an arrow with it and shoot it myself!"

"Did you see our cattle this morning?" Brock asked coldly.

"No, I became so engrossed in hunting relics on this knoll that—"

"Go ahead and play!" Brock interrupted. "I'll go and check up on the cattle. I wouldn't want work to interfere with your relic hunting!"

"Don't jump at conclusions," Andy said.

"And don't jump when I tell you this," Brock answered. "The world knows now that Ledge Langford's a killer. He tried to hold up a bank over at Tall Sage. He didn't get the loot he hoped for, but he did kill the banker. A well-liked man named Bob Mitchell."

"The beast!" Andy said in a low tone. "If they had put him where he belonged, this wouldn't of happened."

"They'll put him there this time, if they get hold of him," Brock said, his words edged with bitterness. "He didn't kill just a poor homesteader this time. They've already posted a thousand-dollar reward on his scalp."

WITH that, Brock rode on. The farther he was obliged to ride, the more irked he became. He was fed up with doing all the work, while Andy Hale amused himself with a hobby.

It wasn't a satisfactory partnership, Brock told himself. Nor would it ever be. The best thing to do, he reasoned, would be to dissolve it. Andy could take the homestead his son had proved up on, the one on the east side of Antler Creek, and move to the cabin over there. Brock would see that the few head of cattle were equally divided, and the horses. Then Andy could do as he pleased, chase relics all day if he so desired, then sell out for what he could get and go back to his school teaching.

This was the course, Brock, troubled and despondent, firmly elected to follow. Yet he made no mention of it to old Andy that evening, nor the next. He kept postponing the news. Perhaps, he thought, because old Andy was Jim's father. But he didn't change his mind. He only found it a little harder to control his anger when Andy Hale started chattering about Indian relics.

It was a long ten days later that Brock reached the end of his rope. Early that morning Andy Hale had announced his intention of riding to town, and without troubling to explain why.

Nettled by this announcement, Brock said, "Go ahead. But I'm not going to stack wild hay alone. I'll go out and look at the cattle, if the Indian relics on Battle Mound don't make me forget my work!"

Brock's day had proved to be an arduous one. All morning long he had searched for three of their cows. Not until afternoon did he find them, bogged down almost up to their backbones in a little slough in the upper meadows.

Grimly, Brock went to work, and thought unpleasant things about Andy's trip to Squaw Lodge. If Andy were here to help, if two horses could pull on ropes anchored to those big, bogged-down critters—

An hour later, muddy, wet with muck and sweat, Brock rode back to the ranchhouse to get a shovel he would need. Andy should be home by this time. But the cabin, surrounded by cottonwoods, was deserted. Brock swore to himself and, without waiting to eat, got a shovel and rode back to the mired cattle. There he shoveled muck and more muck. Twice he broke his lariat.

It was dusk when he rode up to the cabin. There was still no sign of Andy. "This is the end!" Brock growled to himself. "When he comes home, I'll tell him off!"

Brock washed his hand and face. He was drying himself when he heard a footstep in the dooryard. He strode to

the door and said, "It's about time you—"

His words broke off. His dark eyes stared. There before him, gripping a six-shooter in his hand, stood a raw-boned man with a crooked nose. Buttonlike eyes burning under their sloping brow, Ledge Langford, murderer, spoke coldly.

"Well, Mr. Brock Naylor, the pleasure's all mine!" he spat.

Brock said nothing. His old sixshooter was hanging on the opposite wall of the room. He knew he would never be able to get to it in time, any more than Jim Hale had been able to get his rifle into action. He knew that if he moved, the gun of gaunt, wolfish-looking Langford would cut him down.

"I'm taking a fresh horse, your big sorrel, when I leave here, Naylor," Langford said. "But you won't see me. That's because I've got you where I want you—a few feet from the end of my gun!"

"You going to murder me in cold blood, like you murdered Jim Hale and the banker?" Brock said.

"Exactly!" Langford said gloatingly. "I might've married a flossy-looking blonde girl, if you hadn't slanted my nose off this way. She don't love me no more, Naylor. She shivered the last time she saw me, thanks to them big fists of yours! I don't see old Hale around. Maybe you'll be kind enough to tell me where he keeps his Indian relics. Talk up, Naylor. You ain't got but a minute to live!"

"Why do you want them relics of Hale's?" Brock parried.

"You've got ten seconds to tell me where they are!" Langford said, and his gun came a little closer. "Tell me, or else!"

JUST what happened next, Brock wasn't quite certain. He heard a movement by the biggest of the three cottonwoods shading the cabin, and saw something like a swift, dark mark being drawn through the deepening dusk. Then Ledge Langford gasped sharply and plunged to the earth, face down.

Brock saw Andy Hale, a long, tightly strung bow clutched in his hand, move slowly into view around the trunk of the cottonwood. He saw the mild little man move toward Ledge Langford and roll him over on his back. Then Brock's staring eyes saw the arrow protruding from the left side of the dead man's chest.

"It was the pretty arrowhead, Brock—the beautiful red-flint one I showed you up on Battle Mound that day," Andy said calmly. "I had to try it, had to keep it, even if all the other relics I took to town today are sold."

"Sold?" Brock echoed stupidly.

"To a gentleman from the East," Andy said. "I expected him today. He's the president of a wealthy sportsmen's club back east. He was much pleased with my collection. And it was a rather wonderful one, I think. He paid me two thousand dollars, but he made the mistake of telling a stranger, a slanted-nosed coyote, about the value of a fine collection of relics!"

"And the coyote came here to collect your relics, along with my scalp!" Brock said. "Golly, Andy! It's a good thing you showed up when you did!"

"I saw Langford riding this way, or thought I did," Andy said. "I didn't have any gun, but I can shoot a bow and arrow. Practiced many years."

"Shoot? I'll say you can!" Brock whooped, glad to emerge, unscathed, from the shadows of a swift, violent death. "You've just made a thousand-dollar shot, Andy! A thousand-dollar reward for that banker's killer!"

"Which will give us three thousand, pard," said Andy, smiling. "We can buy quite a few cattle, and a couple of good bulls, with that. And I promise not to be off chasing arrowheads so much anymore. You've had a pretty raw deal since Jim died. But you've been patient, Brock. But from now on, things will be better for us—much better!"

"I haven't been as patient as you think," Brock said huskily. "But I'll try to make things up to you, pard. Them things I thought and, thank Heaven, didn't say! Golly, I wish Jim could be here now. He'd be mighty proud of his dad, Andy. As proud as I am to be your pard!"

"We'll keep the red-flint arrowhead in memory of him," Andy said, huskily.

"Always," Brock agreed. "And when things don't go just right, maybe I can look at that arrowhead and remember that it brought things out right, and forever stopped the gun of a murderer! But none too soon for me. Nope. None too soon!"

The saloon roared with explosive shots, with swirls of pungent powdersmoke

# FRUIT OF THE COTTONWOOD

## By RALEY BRIEN

*Jeff Branston, courageous young cowboy, takes a turn at sheriffing when a vicious owlhoot band gets too proddy!*

JEFF BRANSTON, the young sheriff, rode around the shoulder of the hill and reined in his pony abruptly. He looked ahead at the twisting creek and the big cottonwood growing on its bank, and saw he had arrived too late.

He had been warned, but not in time. His furious ride from the county seat fifteen miles away had been for nothing. For there before him, hanging from thick limbs of the huge cottonwood, was gruesome fruit—two human bodies stretching rope, wrists tied behind their backs and ankles lashed, heads hanging forward, bodies that swayed under pressure from the gusty wind that raced along the valley.

Jeff touched with his spurs and made the jaded pony walk on. The young sheriff's face was the inscrutable mask of a

man in whose mind there was a tumult he did not want to reveal. He faced a stern task now, one nobody else could perform.

Jeff Branston had been a cowpuncher on this Crooked Creek range. But an exhibition of courage and daring, and of quick and accurate shooting while with a posse chasing outlaws, had won him a deputy sheriff's job two years before. And recently, when the old sheriff had died from pneumonia, the Governor had named Jeff to carry on during the interim until the next election.

Jeff was only twenty-eight, tall and lanky and with a manner serious beyond his years. His youth and inexperience were liabilities in such an office. But he had made good on the job so far. He even had some hope of being regularly elected to the sheriff's post. And now this!

The new Governor had started in office with a determination to wipe out rabid lawlessness. One of his first pronouncements had been against stringing up rustlers and horse thieves and men suspected of murder. The state had laws and officials to enforce them, and courts in which men could be tried legally, the state executive had pointed out.

And the old sheriff had sent out word that as far as his county was concerned the Governor's orders would be carried out, and that he would arrest for murder anyone participating in an unlegalized hanging.

The old sheriff's warning had not been disregarded. But he was gone now, and young Jeff Branston wore the sheriff's badge. And some men had decided that Branston would hesitate to move in a stern manner.

In this emergency, Jeff faced his first really serious situation. He felt he must do as the old sheriff would have done, or turn in his badge. And if he did that, afterward he would have to live with himself with the constant thought, especially in the silence of night when sleep would not come, that he had failed to be a man.

SENSING the presence of death, Jeff's pony snorted as he was pulled to a stop near the giant cottonwood. Jeff bent forward in his saddle and looked at the swinging bodies.

Sam Adler and Tom James. Two middle-aged men who had come to the Crooked Creek range with a few dollars and had started a modest spread. Both unmarried, and without relatives or friends, as far as people here knew.

Bnt in the short time they had been in the district, they had won reputations for being hard-working and honest, and for dealing fairly with their neighbors. They scraped for money to buy necessities and were often close to having to eat their own beef. Nobody, however, had questioned their honesty.

Now here they swung lifeless at the ends of ropes, victims of a hanging by infuriated men. Somebody, Jeff thought, must have come forward with evidence plausible enough to inflame the ranch owners and their punchers. Somebody must have had a motive for wishing the deaths of Sam Adler and Tom James, for working up a crowd of men to the point of violence.

Jeff rode around the big cottonwood. In the soft earth were hoofprints of several mounts and boot tracks made by several men. The ropes that had choked life from the bodies were ordinary lariats such as most range men carried on their saddles. There was no evidence in them, if it happened that he needed evidence later.

Jeff finally turned his pony away from the tree and loped easily on toward the little cowtown of Crooked Creek. When he reached the end of the street, he turned toward the blacksmith shop. Al Edwards, the blacksmith, was his old friend, and would give him a true picture of what had occurred.

Edwards was busy at his ringing anvil, and nobody else was there as Jeff dismounted in front of the little smithy and ground-hitched his pony. He swung through the doorway, swaying slightly from the fatigue of his hard ride. Al Edwards glanced up and saw him, and stopped work on a wagon tire. He wiped his hands on his leather apron and strode forward.

"Howdy, Jeff! Thought you'd be ridin' this way about now," the blacksmith said.

"But I got here too late."

"I sent that cowpoke with the word and told him to ride hellbent, but things moved too fast at this end."

"I just rode past the tree," Jeff said. "So

it was Sam Adler and Tom James."

"And both of'm strictly all-right men, in my opinion. I can't think they were rustlin'," Edwards declared. "They kept sayin' they were innocent, and I believe 'em. But when a bunch of range men gets liquored up and sees red about rustlers, they don't listen much."

"That's right, Al." Jeff leaned wearily against the wall and fumbled in his shirt pocket for tobacco-sack and matches.

"What are you aimin' to do, Jeff?"

"I've got a duty, Al. Tell me about it."

"A couple of months or so ago, talk started about cattle bein' missin'. The talk spread over the range. The loudest talk came from Kirk Holmes, who owns the Rafter H, as you know. His side kick, Newt Gray, talked loud too."

Jeff began rolling his cigarette. "Go on."

"Kirk Holmes thinks he's the big boss hereabouts and that other men must think his way. The Rafter H is a man ranch. There's been no woman on the place since Mrs. Holmes died five years ago. So he's got a bunch of tough punchers in his bunkhouse, men who'll do anything he says."

"Cuss it, Al, I know all that! Get down to this hangin' business," Jeff told him.

"Well, 'bout three weeks ago, whispers commenced floatin' around that maybe Adler and James knew somethin' about the missin' cattle. I know mighty well Kirk Holmes started that whisperin'. He had Newt Gray and some of his punchers spread it. Gray was the one who dropped the hint to me."

"Ask him why Adler and James were suspected?"

"I did that. Also asked what they thought they did with the stock, if they were rustlers. It was all branded stuff and you can't make a Rafter H brand into their A Bar J, for instance. Newt said 'twas thought they didn't change brands, but had pals pick up the stock and drive it on and divvy with 'em."

THE sheriff took a deep inhale of his cigarette. "And then?" he prompted.

"'Cordin' to their yarn, last evenin' Holmes and Gray rode out on the range," the blacksmith continued. "There was a bright full moon. Said they heard cattle bawlin' in a little box canyon on A Bar J land. As they rode to investigate, they saw two riders goin' into the canyon, and followed 'em. Caught Adler and James there, and disarmed 'em and tied 'em up."

"What about the cattle?" Jeff asked.

"That's the worst part of it. It was Rafter H stock. They took Adler and James to the Rafter H, and sent punchers to guard the stock and others to rouse the neighbors. So stockmen and their punchers came ridin' to town. Holmes and Gray and three of the Rafter H men brought in Adler and James."

"What did Adler and James have to say?"

"Kept declarin' they weren't guilty. Said that they'd heard cattle bawlin', too, and had gone to investigate. Said they didn't know how the Rafter H cattle came to be on their land."

"What else, Al?"

"Here in town, Holmes paid for all the liquor anybody wanted to drink, like it was his party. I saw what was comin' and sent that rider to warn you. Some cooler men talked agin doin' anything rash, suggestin' that Adler and James be taken to the county-seat and turned over."

"And Kirk Holmes didn't like that idea?"

"He howled agi'n it. Said rustlin' had to stop. Newt Gray was the first to yell 'String 'em up!' They kicked and cuffed Adler and James some, and finally put nooses around their necks. Then a bunch rode to the cottonwood, makin' Adler and James walk along behind their ponies at the ends of the ropes."

"How many men were in the actual lynching party, Al?"

"Maybe a dozen. The rest didn't have any stomach for it, and stayed in the saloon. The others came back after they'd strung the men up, and some of 'em drifted out of town. Holmes and Newt Gray superintended the lynchin'. They're still over in the saloon with a couple of Rafter H punchers. Men from other outfits have ridden home."

Jeff threw away the cigarette he had only partly smoked and paced in front of the forge, his brow furrowed in thought. He hitched up his overalls and tightened his gun-belt, and took the gun out of its holster. He examined the weapon, then shoved it back, as Al Edwards watched.

"Is old Doc Sloane drunk or sober?"

Jeff asked.

"He soaked up plenty of free booze last night, but he gets sober quick. Why?"

"I want Doc to examine the bodies and certify as to the cause of death."

"Guess that's no puzzle, Jeff."

"Prob'ly not, but I want everything official." Jeff tugged self-consciously at his hat. "I'll be ridin' on to the saloon, Al. Fetch my pony inside the smithy, and give him water and a feed after he's cooled off, huh?"

"What are you intendin' to do, Jeff?"

"What this badge I'm wearin' says I must do, Al."

"Godfrey! You're only one man, Jeff. Well—I'll be around if you need help."

"Don't side me in this, Al," Jeff warned. "Kirk Holmes is a power in these parts, at least he is now. And you live and work here in Crooked Creek. If Holmes came out of this 'thout bad trouble, he'd settle with you."

"We've been friends since we were kids," the blacksmith reminded him. "So I'll anyhow take off my apron and stroll up the street."

Jeff started walking along the street as Al Edwards got his pony and led him into the smithy to tie him to the snub ring. As he passed the buildings, he saw men watching him through the dirt-streaked windows. Nobody was out in the street. Jeff took off his riding gauntlets and tucked them under his belt on the left side and strode into the saloon.

A BABBLE of talk greeted Jeff as he entered. But an instant later there was silence except for the sounds his boots made on the floor as he walked to the head of the bar. Faces were turned toward him, eyes gleamed at him. Jeff began making a fresh cigarette.

"I want some men to get a wagon and bring in the bodies from the cottonwood," Jeff announced, quietly. "Get blankets from the store to wrap 'em in. Is Doc Sloane around?"

"Right here in the corner, Jeff," the old doctor called. He got up and stalked toward the bar in a ludicrous drunken attempt at dignity.

"I'll want your official report on the cause of death, for the records," Jeff told him. "Stand by to 'tend to it."

Kirk Holmes got up from a chair at a card table and walked toward the bar with Newt Gray at his heels. Holmes was a heavy man who possessed what he fondly thought was a commanding appearance. Gray was tall and skinny, with a face expressing his inward meanness.

"Newt, take our two boys and a couple of town men and get a wagon and do as the sheriff says," Holmes directed.

Newt Gray leered, beckoned to the Rafter H punchers and a couple of the town loafers, and they left the saloon. Holmes bellied to the bar a few feet from Jeff.

"Drink, Sheriff?" he invited.

"Thanks, no. Not till my job's finished."

Holmes eyed him and moved nearer. None of the others in the room approached the bar, and the man behind it got busy at the lower end, pretending to wipe glasses.

"Clever of you, gettin' Doc to make a report and havin' everything official," Holmes suggested, his voice low and rumbling.

"That's usual," Jeff replied. "Wish I'd got here in time to stop it."

"Everybody was pretty hot," Holmes said. "We can't abide rustlers hereabouts. Law's too slow sometimes. Got to keep the range clean."

"That's right! We've got to make the range clean and keep it clean," Jeff said, with some significance in the remark.

Holmes frowned slightly. "The Governor's a city man and doesn't understand range folks. You do, Jeff—used to be a cowpoke. Anyhow, it'll be easy enough for you to make a report that it's impossible to learn who did the actual lynchin'."

"But I know now," Jeff said.

"A man can forget easy when it pays him to do so," Holmes hinted. "Some of us were talkin' the other day about you. We decided you should be elected to the sheriff's office at the comin' election. We can swing the election your way, offset any votin' agi'n you in the county seat."

"Could it be that you're suggestin' a kind of bribe?" Jeff asked, looking straight at him. "Leave this to me, Holmes. I want everything official. Don't make it look to others like you're givin' me orders."

Holmes winked. "Wise lad! I'll keep away from you and let you 'tend to the business your own way."

Jeff went out on the walk, and old Doc Sloane followed him, as did some of the town loafers.

"Doc, you might get the key from the storekeeper and open the old barber shop buildin' and have the bodies taken there," Jeff said. "Make your routine examination and I'll want a written report for the record. I s'pose it'll be death from the hangin', but look to see if there's any bullets in the bodies."

"I'll 'tend to it, Sheriff," Doc said, pompously.

The wagon finally returned with the blanket-wrapped bodies of the hanged men, and the bodies were taken into the barber shop building, now vacant. As Doc began his examination, Jeff went back into the saloon.

Doc Sloane returned there after his work was done, got paper and pencil, wrote his report and handed it to Jeff. Holmes, Newt Gray, the two Rafter H punchers and some townsmen stood around waiting. Jeff looked them over.

He had been doing some rapid, serious thinking. It would not be difficult to handle this affair so he could save trouble for himself. But he remembered the old sheriff, and the badge he now wore, and he remembered that he knew certain things these men did not know. He straightened, hitched up his overalls and adjusted his holster, glanced at Doc's report again and put it down on the bar.

"Gents," he said, "in our state a sheriff is *ex officio* coroner when there is no coroner or he is absent. I now act as coroner. My verdict is that the two men came to their deaths by strangulation due to bein' hanged by the neck. This is based on Doc Sloane's report."

MEN stirred while Kirk Holmes smiled slightly. Newt Gray grinned.

"My verdict also is that these men were murdered and that the murderers should be placed under arrest and made to answer in court for their crime."

"You crazy, Jeff?" Holmes asked. "Callin' it murder for men to string up a couple of rustlers?"

"These men were not rustlers, and even if they had been it'd have been murder for others to take the law into their own hands."

Holmes laughed. "If you made arrests, you'd only make a fool of yourself. You'd have ranch men on the jury, and you'd never get a verdict of guilty."

"I ain't the court," Jeff pointed out. "I don't conduct trials. My job's only to make arrests and give testimony. And there's another thing—"

"Wait a second! You said these men weren't rustlers," Holmes broke in.

"That's right."

"Shucks! Everybody knows they were down to eatin' their own beef. They didn't amount to anything and were a disgrace to the range. They rustled to get money. I knew their plight and offered to buy 'em out, but they refused to sell. Wanted a headquarters for their rustlin'—that's why. And two weeks ago Sam Adler was missin' for four days. Contactin' his rustler friends. No doubt him and James gathered in the cattle from the range, hid 'em and waited for their friends to pick 'em up and drive 'em away."

"If they were makin' money rustlin', they sure wouldn't be down to eatin' their own beef," Jeff suggested.

"They were slick. Didn't dare flash prosperity too quick when everybody knew they were broke. Might cause talk and suspicion."

"They weren't busted," Jeff said. "A couple of weeks ago, Sam Adler got ten thousand dollars from his uncle's estate. The uncle lived over Texas way. The four days he was missin' from here he was at the county seat openin' his bank account. He ordered some good breedin' stock, and it's due here 'bout now. He ordered a lot of buildin' materials and hired carpenters to work next month. He said he was goin' to build a big new barn and put in a lot of fencin' and get the ranch goin' right."

"Well, what of it?" Holmes snapped.

"Shows they didn't have to steal cattle to get eatin' money," Jeff replied. "Shows where Adler was them four days he was away from home. He was in the county seat all that time. He came to me, told me in front of witnesses 'bout you tryin' to buy him out, and said you'd threatened to make it hot for him if he didn't sell."

"He lied."

"He can't dispute that statement now," Jeff said, quietly.

"I offered to buy him and James out,

yes. Wanted men like them off this range."

"Soon as you found they wouldn't sell to you," Jeff put in. "You'd been usin' their land for grazin' for years, and when they bought it that cut off your free grazin' land. And there's still another thing."

"What is it?" Holmes asked.

"If this lynchin' hadn't happened, I was comin' out anyhow in a few days with some of my deputies to investigate the missin' stock around here. I've got a lot of evidence. A few days ago, two of my deputies ran into a couple of suspicious characters in Mesaville, and investigated. Those two, and another man, were drivin' a herd of mixed brands, hittin' for the river. The men were rounded up. I've got their signed confessions, and the men are in jail."

"Confessions about what?" Holmes demanded.

"They confessed the whole thing, hopin' to get off with light sentences. Told how you hired 'em to pick up rustled cattle, Holmes. It was cattle you had your own men rustle."

"Are you crazy? Me turn rustler? Know how many head of cattle I own?"

"You didn't do it for profit, Holmes. And we've checked and double-checked the yarns them men told. I had to make the ride here alone 'cause all my deputies were away workin' on the case. But left word for 'em to follow me, and they'll be here soon. You had your men rustle them cattle and hide the stock, had the critters picked up by the three men we caught, so the range would get hot about rustlin'. Then you threw suspicion on Adler and James."

"That all you've got to say?" Holmes asked.

"A little more. You got the range men inflamed to where they turned into a lawless mob. You knew Adler and James were innocent, yet you induced men to murder 'em, and helped do it yourself, along with Gray. So you could buy the A Bar J land for next to nothin'."

"Best yarn I've heard in years," Holmes declared.

"It's all tied up, Holmes. You and Gray and some of your men would have been arrested in a few days for conspiracy and rustlin' your neighbors' cattle to mix with some of your own and pass on to the men we caught. But it's more serious now, Holmes. I'm puttin' you and Gray under arrest here and now for murder! We'll corral the others soon enough."

IT was Newt Gray who made the move Jeff expected. Gray's hand darted to his holster. His gun cleared leather. Then a bullet from Jeff's gun smashed into his arm and Gray dropped the weapon and reeled back against the bar.

Jeff heard a voice beside him, the voice of Al Edwards, the blacksmith: "You ain't alone, Jeff." And he knew Al was standing there with a weapon in his hand.

The townsmen in the place had dropped to the floor or backed against the walls. Doc Sloane dropped down behind the bar with the saloon man. There was a moment of silence.

Then Kirk Holmes came to life.

"A kid sheriff, huh?" he said. His gun ripped from the holster, its muzzle spewing flame and smoke and lethal metal.

The two Rafter H punchers darted in, drawing weapons. The saloon roared with explosive shots, with swirls of pungent powdersmoke.

And then the smoke cleared, and Holmes was on the floor, and the two Rafter H punchers were wounded and sprawled over card tables, Al Edwards was gritting his teeth because of the pain from a shoulder wound. Jeff was braced against the bar with a bullet through the fleshy part of his left leg.

"Doc," he called, "crawl out and 'tend to folks. I don't think any of'm are dead. Hope not. Patch 'em up so they can be carted to jail. Some of my deputies should be here soon. 'Tend to Al soon as you can, too, and maybe I'll need a bandage after that."

So Doc got up from behind the bar and cleared his throat, poured and downed a hasty drink, and got to work. Jeff continued leaning against the bar. He glanced around the room at the few unhurt townsmen who remained.

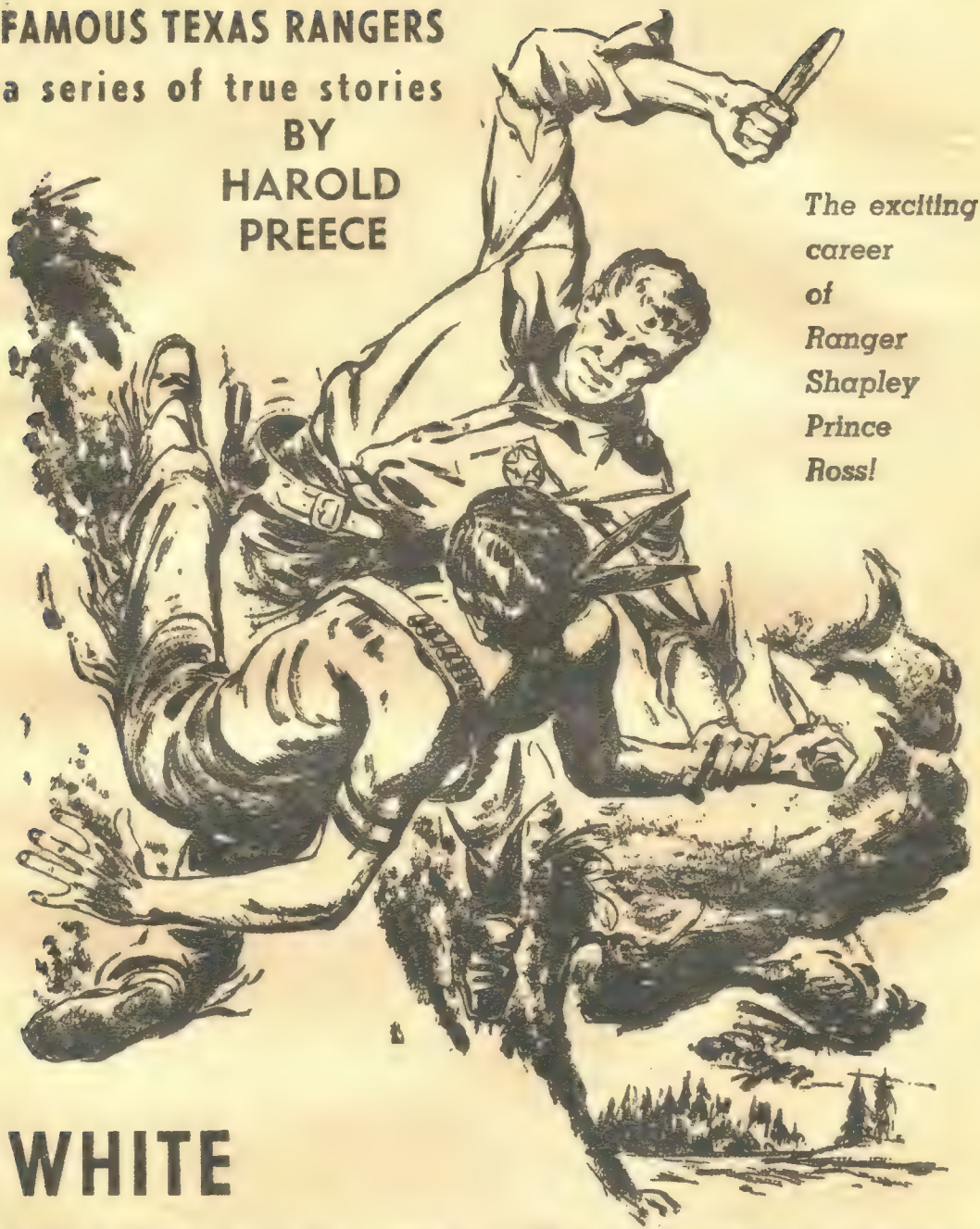
"One of you gents be kind enough to come here and roll a cigarette for me," he directed. "I've got to keep my side gun in one hand just in case this ain't over, and I've got to hold on to the bar with the other. And I feel like I want a smoke."

**FAMOUS TEXAS RANGERS**

**a series of true stories**

**BY HAROLD PREECE**

*The exciting career of Ranger Shapley Prince Ross!*



# WHITE WARRIOR OF THE BRAZOS

THE five whites were soaked to the skin as the rain poured down from the gray Texas skies. Their teeth were chattering, but not from fear as their tired mules rounded the trail. On the wet banks of Boggy Creek, they met the five red men mounted on fine horses that bore the brands of Texan ranchers.

"A pretty sight—Texas Rangers ridin' these flop-eared flea bags after Injuns mounted on ponies they stole from under our very nose," one of the whites sighed. "A mule just ain't a fit mount for a man."

The disgusted rider was letting his hand stray toward his rifle when the tall, moustached young fellow, commanding the Texans, reached out with his left hand and covered the trigger. Then the Ranger officer raised his right hand in the Indian sign of peace.

"We come not to fight but to recover the horses and goods of our neighbors," he said in Spanish to the huge, muscular chief of the band. "You will return that which is not yours and go back to your tepees in peace. It is, I, Shapley Ross, the friend of the red man, speaking to his brother, Big Foot, the chief."

The livid war paint was running down the cheeks of Chief Big Foot as the rain drenched his sullen face. He looked toward the skies whose downpour had once watered the fertile plots of his kin, but now blessed the alien fields of the swarming palefaces.

The hate of generations flashed from the chief's tongue as he shot back:

"You steal our lands and kill our buffalo. We burn your houses and take your horses. Let the Great Spirit judge between red men and white men."

His hand moved like lightning. A stone tomahawk whizzed by Ross' ear. The Texans aimed their guns as red men charged white men. But no sound came from the heavy, frontier rifles, nor from the guns of the Indians frantically snapping their triggers. As if the Great Spirit wanted peace between his children of both races, the rain had dampened the powder and made guns useless.

### *Texans Fight Indians*

The Texans swung their guns by the wet barrels, using the butt ends as clubs in the furious battle that followed. Knives were drawn on each side for hand-to-hand fighting. In five minutes, crimson rivulets were staining the swelling waters of Boggy Creek.

Ross and his namesake-nephew Shapley Woolfolk, found themselves atop a steep bluff fighting Big Foot and another Indian. By now, attackers and attacked were on foot as their terrified mounts had dashed to the shelter of thickets.

Big Foot and his brave drew their scalping knives and charged the two whites. The Texans grappled with their enemies and all four men rolled down the muddy bluff and into the angry creek.

The skies crashed with thunder, a fitting accompaniment to that savage battle as the four combatants came up sputtering.

Ross yelled for the chief to surrender. "We'll take you and your braves back to Nashville settlement, warm you by our fires, and send you home unharmed," he shouted in the language of Spain as the rolling thunder mocked his words.

Big Foot shook his head. "The Great Spirit speaks from the thunder!" he howled back in that same language understood by all the plains tribes. "The thunder is our omen of victory."

The Indian was within fifty feet of the Texan. He lunged toward Ross as a great streak of lightning lit up the chill, darkening skies. His foot slipped in the muddy bottom of the creek. Shap Ross, having no other choice, sprang forth to slay.

He caught the long braided hair of the chief with one hand. He drew his Bowie knife. It slashed into the heart of Big Foot, the proud, unyielding sagamore who would have no traffic with whites.

For a minute, the Ranger gazed down sadly at the body of the warrior whirling in the churning waters. He admired Indian courage and forth-rightness. He was sorry that he had been forced to kill one more brave enemy.

When he looked around, his nephew had also got his man. Three more dead warriors lay on the creek bank. But all the Texans were alive.

Shap Ross let his men brag over their victory. They had that much coming to them after that long chase in the beating rain. But he said gravely:

"I don't want you boys going on any Indian-killing rampage because we had to wipe out this bunch that wouldn't behave. I found most redskins to be pretty good folks when I was a licensed trader among the Sacs and Foxes out in Iowa."

He rubbed his moustache thoughtfully. "I admit you got to get 'em out of the way to settle up Texas. But you should give 'em something to live on and something

to hope for while you're doing it."

Only one man in Texas knew and respected Indians as much as Kentucky-born Shapley Prince Ross. That was Ross' bosom friend, General Sam Houston, who'd liberated from Mexico this big chunk of wilderness calling itself the Texas Republic. Sam Houston had been an adopted member of the friendly Cherokee tribe in Tennessee and Arkansas. Shap Ross had brought up his family among the friendly Sacs and Foxes on the Des Moines River of the Midwest.

"The kind of settlers we need," Old Sam had said when he'd seen spunky Kate Ross and her four young ones rolling in by covered wagon from Shap's adopted state of Missouri.

### *Birth of the Rangers*

When Shap Ross moved to Texas in 1838, he was not only witnessing the birth of a great state. He was also seeing born the world's greatest force of frontier fighters. That was the Texas Rangers, starting as small volunteer bands of citizens organized to protect the struggling settlements against bad Indians and bad whites.

Shap stood six feet, two inches high and weighed one hundred and ninety pounds when he swore allegiance to the Republic of Texas. The tall descendant of Scottish and Irish kings was mindful of that oath to defend Texas when the Rangers were given official status in 1842. He and his nephew, Shap Wolfolk, joined that first immortal company of fighting Texans led by that greatest of all Rangers, Captain Jack Hays.

Shap Ross knew that the Rangers had to deal with Indians in tongue talk as well as trigger talk if Texas was not to be crushed by invasions of the fierce Plains tribes after it had hurled back invasions of the Mexicans. Jack Hays once said, "Shap Ross kept down more Indian wars than we ever had to fight."

Time after time, it was the tall young Texan who walked boldly into camps of sullen Indians and persuaded them to return back across Red River into Indian Territory. The red men realized that Shap Ross knew no fear. It was a tradition among them, too, that he never made a promise that he didn't keep.

If he told them that the Rangers would not fall upon them as they were trailing back across Red River, he saw that not one brave suffered a scratch on Texas soil. But he also let the warriors know that they would be wiped out without mercy if they harmed one Texas settler.

Texans began saying that they had not only a great fighter, but an outstanding statesman in Shap Ross. And Shap Ross told them that they had to start distinguishing between good Indians and bad Indians.

He started making alliances with friendly tribes like the Lipans and the Tonkawas. These tribes had their own scores to settle with the hell-ridin' Comanches and Kiowas who robbed and slew them along with the whites. Presently, braves from the friendly tribes were riding with the Texas Rangers as scouts and fellow-fighters. Shap Ross and shrewd old Chief Placido, of the Tonkawas became staunch friends. And it was a friendship that lasted for life.

Shap Ross hadn't been in Jack Hays' company long when his commander sent him to Mexico to learn the status of some ill-advised, trigger-tempered Texans who'd invaded that country in a filibustering expedition.

That foray, known as the Mier Expedition, had wound up in disaster as Shap knew it would. The Texans had been captured, blindfolded, and placed before a big bowl containing one hundred and fifty-nine white beans and seventeen black ones. Those who drew the black ones were shot by order of Mexican Dictator Santa Anna, who was still smarting under the whipping that Sam Houston's poorly-armed, outnumbered Texans had given him at San Jacinto.

### *Ross Gets Dangerous Job*

Shap's assignment was a difficult and dangerous one for any man. Any Texan —and particularly a Texas Ranger— risked being shot on sight if he crossed into Mexico, that still hoped to reconquer its big, lost province. But Ross, keeping his tongue still and his ears open, soon learned that the Mier survivors were being imprisoned and constantly tortured in Mexican jails.

Then he crossed back to Texas without

a scratch. His report to the Texas government raised a storm of angry protest against Mexico in the United States and Great Britain, which was exactly what Shap Ross wanted it to do. Because Shap had started the ball rolling, all the Texan prisoners were gradually released before the first shots were fired in the Mexican War, three years later.

When the Mexican War broke out, Shap was commissioned a Ranger captain to protect the home soil of Texas against the Comanches, who started pouring in from across Red River when most of the male settlers went to Mexico.

In the fall of 1847, he led the Rangers to the menaced "heartland" of Texas—the Brazos River section in the central part of the state. This area was the chosen hunting ground of a dozen different tribes who jealously guarded it. They were a solid block against the expansion of Texan settlements farther west.

But a few brave families had settled there under the leadership of the old Scotch patriarch, Neil McLennan, who'd first adminstered the Texas oath of allegiance to Shap Ross. Shap called the Indian chiefs to a council at his headquarters on Station Creek. He shook hands with them, gave them presents, fed them royally, and, in man-to-man talk, persuaded them to behave.

There was one tribe which refused to attend the council or make any truce with the white settlers. That tribe was the Comanche, whose pagan religion taught them that the Great Spirit created them especially to conquer all other peoples, and particularly palefaces.

Early in 1848, a terrified Negro woman dashed into Shap's camp. The Ranger captain recognized her as Neil McLennan's housekeeper. After he'd calmed her fears, the woman told him that a thousand Comanches had fallen on the old Scotchman's ranch to butcher his cattle and loot his corn cribs.

"Saddle up, boys!" Shap barked to his Rangers. "We got business."

Twenty Texas Rangers, carbines loaded and knives sharpened, galloped toward Neil McLennan's place on the South Bosque River.

When they arrived, not a Comanche was in sight. But a tall, young white man who wore his hair in long braids like an Indian walked toward them.

Shap recognized him as Neil's half-wild nephew, "Bosque John" McLennan, who had been brought up by Indians after being captured as a child.

Bosque John spoke simply like an Indian. "My brothers, the Comanches, robbed my uncle because they hungered," he said. "Wait, and don't shoot."

He began shouting in voluble Comanche. Indians started swarming from the brush and from the tall grass. Soon, the prairie was alive with them, a thousand savage warriors looking with laughing contempt on the score of Texans.

Shap Ross spoke in English and Bosque John interpreted in Comanche. "I, Shapley Ross, am the big chief of this country," the Ranger captain said. "My company will escort you back to the Indian Territory border and see that you have much beef and corn on the way—if your braves throw that stolen corn back into Neil McLennan's crib."

### *Comanches Dodge Fight*

The Comanche chief leered. "And if we choose to keep the corn?" he asked through Bosque John.

The Ranger captain patted his carbine. "You won't live for your squaws to grind it into meal," he shot back.

There was a stir in the Comanche camp. Ross' men cocked their carbines and leveled them on the chief. He would be the first man to die if there was a battle. And superstitious Comanches wouldn't fight after a chief had fallen.

The sagamore turned and shouted to his braves: "Bring back the corn and put it in the paleface's cribs."

After the Mexican War, a town was laid out on the Brazos, not far from Shap's old camp. It was called Waco, after a nearby tribe of Indians. Its founders were the great ex-Ranger, George Erath, and a noted British colonizer of the Jewish faith, Jacob de Cordova.

They persuaded Shap, now retiring from the Rangers, to be its first settler. Other men poured into the town when a noted Texan like Shap saw fit to establish his ever growing family there.

Shap became not only Waco's first citizen, but also its first innkeeper and its first postmaster. He carried the let-

ters in his tall, silk hat. And whenever Shap Ross doffed his hat before a house, its residents knew that he would pull out a letter for them.

He was a shrewd trader, and he saw that the future wealth of Texas lay in cattle. In 1855, he made one of the very first of the big cattle drives out of the Lone Star State. He bought five hundred steers in Waco for thirteen dollars a head, and sold them in his home state of Missouri for twenty-seven.

Next year, somebody in Washington remembered that there was a man in Texas who knew and understood Indians. To Shapley Ross was entrusted one of the most difficult jobs that the Federal government ever gave any man. And, for awhile, it made Shap unpopular in Texas.

He was appointed Indian agent for the last reservation left in Texas—a tract, ten miles square, near old Fort Belknap in the Upper Brazos section of the Texas Panhandle. He gathered under his wing the Wacos, the Tonkawas, and remnants of several other tribes. He encouraged them to lay down the bow for the plow. He fought to get them decent rations until they could learn how to grow their own crops. But everything he tried to do for his adopted red children was balked by two groups.

One group was the early white settlers of the Panhandle. They wanted all Indians out of Texas. The other group was the Comaches, still raiding from across Red River, still refusing to settle down and be good Indians. The whites in that wild stretch didn't know one Indian from another, and didn't bother about learning. They impartially butchered hunting expeditions of Shap's reservation Indians and raiding parties of the Comanches.

A new and bloody leader had risen among the Comanches. He was the famous Iron Jacket, so named because his uper half was decked out in ancient Spanish armor. The Comanches believed that the armor made their chief invulnerable against any paleface bullets. That notion caused them to descend on the white settlements of the Panhandle in a ravaging red wave.

Colonel John S. Ford, commanding the Texas Rangers, called on his old comrade, Shap Ross, for help against Iron Jacket and his scalp-happy braves. Shap, in turn, consulted with Tonkawa Chief, Placido.

### *Tonkawas Volunteer*

One hundred and thirteen Tonkawa braves joyfully dropped hoes and picked up guns when Placido told them that they were riding against their enemies of a thousand years. It was the first time in their long history as a tribe that they'd ridden out under a white chief to fight other Indians. But that mighty Texan, Shap Ross, made history wherever he set foot.

Shap and his hard-riding Tonkawas joined Ford and a hundred Texas Rangers at Cottonwood Springs on April 22, 1858. For three weeks, they trailed Iron Jacket's band of three hundred Comanche warriors. Then they reached Red River, the boundary of Indian Territory.

Colonel Ford spoke to Shap Ross. "We have no authority over there." The Ranger commander pointed across the river. "You are a federal official. Will you back me up in Washington if I cross my men over to clean up Comanches in their own country."

Shap's face was grave, remembering much. He remembered that oath he'd taken before old Neil McLennan to defend Texas with his life. He recalled another oath he'd taken later—the Ranger oath. It still bound him to this gallant force who disregarded boundaries when Texas was in danger. Texas was their country that they fought for. It was his country, too—the country he'd helped Sam Houston and others hew out of the wilderness.

His words were crisp when he spoke. "Let Washington keep the Comanches home if it wants to save their scalps. And, now, let's get across that river."

On the morning of May 12, the Texans and the Tonkawas topped a high hill in Indian Territory. Below, three miles away, stretched the main Comanche village.

Comanche scouts had warned Iron Jacket of the impending attack. When the joint command of Ford and Ross galloped shooting into his town, Iron Jacket rode out on a fine stallion stolen from a Texas rancher. The chief's armor shone like polished glass under the bright spring sun.

"Greetings, senores!" he shouted in

Spanish. "It is a pleasure to slay Texans and the Tonkawa dogs in their own country. It will be a pleasure to slay them in my country."

The chief's Winchester barked. A Tonkawa scout fell dead from his mustang. Shap Ross drew his rifle. Four Rangers drew theirs. Every bullet found its mark, but Shap's shot landed first.

The five bullets shattered the armor. The great chief of the Comanches tumbled from the stallion. Blood from his punctured lungs dyed red the coat of mail, once worn by a proud *conquistador* of Old Spain.

Until mid-afternoon, the Texans and the Tonkawas, supplemented by a few Shawnees and Anadarkos, slaughtered Comanches. They ran them down in the dense prairies and in the brush-covered foothills. For the Tonkawas, it was one of a thousand battles fought with Comanches over a thousand years. For the Texans, it was a way of telling invaders of any race to stay out of Texas.

One fourth of the Comanche force of three hundred lay dead when the battle was over. Four hundred stolen horses were recovered. Texan casualties were slight—two killed and two wounded.

Ranger Commander Ford embraced ex-Ranger Commander Ross after the fighting was finished and eighteen Comanche captives were being taken back to confinement barracks at Fort Belknap.

"Once a Ranger, always a Ranger, Shap," the Colonel said. "And I'm sending in a Ranger citation for you to headquarters in Austin."

### *Ross Trailed by Indian*

After he'd returned to the reservation in Texas, Shap began to believe that somebody was trailing him. He heard mysterious noises in the woods. He wondered if some bad man he'd grabbed in his Ranger days was trying to bushwhack him. Kate Ross was worried, too. She feared that her man was cracking up after so many years of hard riding with never a rest.

Shap decided to scour the woods and have it out with anybody who'd come to gun him. Then, one day, he found himself face to face with a big Indian who appeared noiselessly from behind a tree.

Ross saw that the brave was from none of the friendly tribes. His hand dived for his weapons. He was sure that his end had come when he realized he'd left his knife and gun at home, under stress of worry.

Then he noticed that the Indian was also unarmed. He heard the warrior speaking.

"Did you shoot one of my people named Big Foot?" the Indian asked.

"Many years ago," Shap answered. "He was a brave man, and I tried to keep from killing him."

"Big Foot was my brother," the Indian replied. "Now, I have no brother."

Was he destined to fight it out barehanded with the brave, Shap wondered. He knew it would be a fight to the death, even it were fought only with fists.

Then the brave spoke again. "You great warrior like Big Foot. Will you be my brother?"

The graying ex-Ranger had never had so much respect for Indians in his whole life when he nodded yes. The brave took hold of Shap's wrist and scratched it with a thorn. Then he pierced his own wrist and held the two wounds together till the blood of the red warrior mingled with that of the white warrior.

### *Ceremony of Brotherhood*

It was the tribe's sacred rite of brotherhood. After it had been performed, the brave disappeared into the woods as silently as he had come.

Shap never saw him again. But he knew now that it would be hard ever to slay another Indian.

He was bound forever by that ceremony of brave red men as he was bound eternally by that oath of brave white men —the Rangers. He knew that he had to protect those last remnants of the peaceful tribes, also his brothers, from narrow-minded whites who judged men by their skins instead of their hearts.

Some day, in Texas and America, there would come a day when men would be measured by their hearts and not their skins. But he knew that he wouldn't live to see it.

Meanwhile, he had a job to do. He had to get the last weary family of the peaceful tribes into the Indian Territory lands

that had been allotted them through the influence of Sam Houston, now Texas' senator in Washington.

George Erath came up from Waco to help with the job. At least, half-a-dozen tribes owe their survival today to Shap Ross who protected them against massacre.

One of those tribes is Placido's Tonkawas. And to this day, the Tonkawas swear by Shapley Prince Ross like Irishmen swear by St. Patrick.

*No More Campfires*

After he'd escorted the last Indian to safety, that year of 1859, Shap went home to Waco. Texas wanted him back in the Rangers. But he was now forty-eight. For a change, he wanted the comfortable fireplace of his fine house instead of the smoky campfires of men who hunted other men.

But he lived to see the wisdom of his policy toward red men confirmed when even the warlike Comanches laid down the bow for the plow.

They became good farmers like they'd been good warriors.

Shap Ross lived to see his great son, Sul, follow in his footsteps by becoming a famous Ranger captain who helped the Comanches bridge the gap from the bow to the plow.

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# NO PLACE FOR STRANGERS

## By MONTE LONG

*Tom Barton matches wits with a pistol-packing girl and tough badge-toter!*

TOM BARTON rode slumped down in the saddle. A big man on a tired, dust covered roan. There was a streak of dried blood on his cheek from the wound on his forehead where the drygulcher's bullet had creased him and knocked him out.

His head ached and throbbed and he couldn't remember how long he had been unconscious. He knew that his money, every cent he'd had in his pockets, was gone, and all the little personal belongings that a man usually carried with him. Yet it was strange that the drygulcher hadn't taken his horse or the cartridge belt and the gun in the holster.

"It just doesn't make sense," Barton muttered, and he was surprised at the strange croaking sound of his own voice. "Here I was riding along a strange road in a part of Texas where I've never been before when—bing—somebody drygulches me, and steals sixteen dollars and seventy-five cents. That holdup man will never get rich that way!"

The roan snorted, apparently puzzled by the croaking voice of the man in the saddle. Tom Barton's voice was usually clear and musical. Evidently the horse was wondering if he was carrying the right rider.

"It's all right, Pete," Barton said with

"Looks like you've got the party I'm after, ma'am," said the man with the badge

a faint smile. "It's me, but right now I seem to have a frog in my throat."

The horse continued on along the road, moving at a fast walk. Even with a quarter moon hanging in the sky the night was dark and shadowy. Barton had been riding since sunrise and he was tired, hungry and thirsty. Ahead and to the right of the road he saw lights gleaming in the distance. As he rode closer he saw that they came from the buildings of a ranch sitting far back from the road.

"Wonder if strangers are welcome on that spread?" Barton said thoughtfully. "Don't reckon it will do any harm to ride in and see."

He found the gate where the ranch road ended at the highway was standing open and rode through. He halted the roan in front of the big ranchhouse. The front door was standing open but there was no sign of anyone around.

"Anybody home?" Barton shouted loudly, relieved to find the huskiness had suddenly left his voice. "Hello, the ranch!"

There was no answer. He grew strangely uneasy at the silence. In his estimation there was something decidedly wrong about the stillness of this place. A feeling of danger, of unseen eyes watching him, swept over him.

QUIETLY Barton slid out of the saddle, dropping the reins and ground-hitching the roan. He adjusted his hat, pulling down the brim so that the crude bandage he had fastened around his head was not easy to see. He loosened the gun in his holster to make sure it was ready for a quick draw.

He went up the steps, walked across the porch and stepped into the hall of the ranchhouse that was lighted by an oil lamp hanging from the ceiling.

"Did you come back to finish the job?" a feminine voice from behind him demanded.

Barton whirled and found himself staring at a pretty brown haired girl. She was dressed in shirt, levis and boots that came just below her knees. She had Barton covered with the gun she held in her right hand.

"Afraid I don't know what you are talking about, miss," Barton said quietly. "But I'm beginning to get the idea this region is no place for strangers."

"Take off your hat and step over there near the wall," the girl ordered coldly.

Barton removed his hat and placed it on a small settee. There were heavy footsteps on the porch and a big man dressed in range clothes stepped into the hall. He had cold eyes, a hard face and a shaggy black mustache. There was a sheriff's star pinned on the left side of his open vest.

"I'm Sheriff Hank Clark from over in Cottonwood County," he said to the girl with a quick glance at Barton. "Looks like you got the man I'm after, ma'am."

"He is also the man who wounded my father in the leg tonight," said the girl. "I'm Nancy Wilson, and this is the Flying W owned by my father, Lem Wilson. Dad was riding home from town tonight when a drygulcher fired at him and wounded him in the leg. Dad returned the fire. He's sure he wounded the drygulcher somewhere around the head, and then Dad managed to get away."

"Any special reason why a drygulcher would want to down your dad?" Clark asked.

"I don't think the drygulcher wanted to really kill Dad," Nancy said. "You see my father had drawn five thousand dollars out of the bank. He was bringing the money home to pay a man who is going to sell Dad a herd of pure bred Herefords in the morning."

"So that's why this hombre came here," Clark said, glaring at Barton. "To try and get that money he must have known your dad was carrying it, Miss Wilson."

"Exactly what I thought!" said Nancy.

Barton started to protest, and then remained silent, staring at a nick in the metal of the sheriff's star on Clark's vest. He looked hard at the big man.

"What's the name of the man you are after, Sheriff?" he asked.

Clark frowned. "You know your name as well as I do," he said impatiently.

"Even better, I suspect," said Barton. "What is my name?"

"You called yourself Adam Dawe when you robbed that bank over in Cottonwood County two days ago," Clark said. "I don't know what name you are using now."

"My name isn't Adam Dawe," Barton said. He smiled. "Sure am an obliging cuss, aren't I? Reckon I walked into the

bank and said, 'Gentlemen, this is Adam Dawe, and I aim to rob the Cottonwood Bank. I sure hope you have no serious objections.' Proving I'm a bigger fool than I thought." He glared at Clark. "Why would a bank robber let folks know his name?"

"Why—why, a feller in the bank recognized you when you were robbing the bank and your mask slipped." Clark appeared a bit confused, and Nancy seemed puzzled as she listened. "The feller told me your name."

"Oh, he did," said Barton. "Sure is nice to know that I have friends everywhere." Abruptly his gun appeared in his right hand covering Clark. "Did he also tell you that I'm fast on the draw?"

"No," Clark said, staring at the Colt in Barton's hand. "He didn't tell me that."

Nancy had lowered the gun she held, but she started to raise it.

"I wouldn't do that, Miss Wilson," Barton said. "I've got a nervous trigger finger. When anyone points a gun at me, I just don't know what I'm doing. Why I might put a bullet in Clark here, and he'd feel mighty bad about that."

"Drop that gun, Miss Wilson," said Clark nervously. "I don't want to be shot."

NANCY hesitated and then let her gun fall to the floor. She stood there watching the two men.

"My name is Tom Barton," Barton said. "Always has been that and nothing else. I'm a stranger in this part of the country. Earlier tonight I was riding along the road peaceful as all get-out. All of a sudden a drygulcher creased me in the head and I was knocked unconscious—"

"Who would believe a yarn like that?" interrupted Clark impatiently.

"I might," Nancy said quietly. "Go on, Tom Barton."

"When I regained consciousness I discovered that I had been robbed of everything in my pockets," Barton continued. "Sixteen dollars and seventy-five cents and some small stuff I was carrying. The drygulching and the robbery didn't make sense to me until just a moment ago. Then I realized that metal sometimes gleams in the moonlight."

"What's that got to do with it?" Clark asked. "Maybe Miss Wilson may believe that big windy you've been telling, but if you didn't have me covered, I'd sure place you under arrest and take you back with me for that bank robbery."

"Just like that?" asked Barton.

"Just like that." The big man nodded.

"But you couldn't do it, Clark," said Barton. "At least not legally. That's why your pretense of being a lawman is hard to believe. The sheriff of Cottonwood county has no jurisdiction in this county. You should have known that, Clark."

Clark cursed and started to reach for his gun, but there was something in Barton's gaze that warned him not to try it.

"Like I said metal gleams in the moonlight," Barton went on calmly. "Which is why Clark drygulched me when he saw the shine of my badge."

"Your badge!" exclaimed Nancy.

"That's right," Barton said. "I'm Sheriff Tom Barton of Cottonwood County. I was on my way to attend a sheriffs' convention in the county beyond this one. Clark stole my badge and some legal papers that I was carrying, but they didn't have my name on them. He just knew I was the sheriff of Cottonwood County." Barton glanced at the star Clark was wearing. "And he thought I wouldn't even recognize my own badge even when it has a nick in it."

"Then Clark must be the man who drygulched Dad—shot him in the leg," said Nancy.

"Of course," said Barton. "Reckon he was in town and saw your dad draw the money out of the bank. So Clark tried to drygulch your dad and get the cash. But he failed, and when I came along he drygulched me. Then he came here still after the money, but now he was going to pretend he was a lawman."

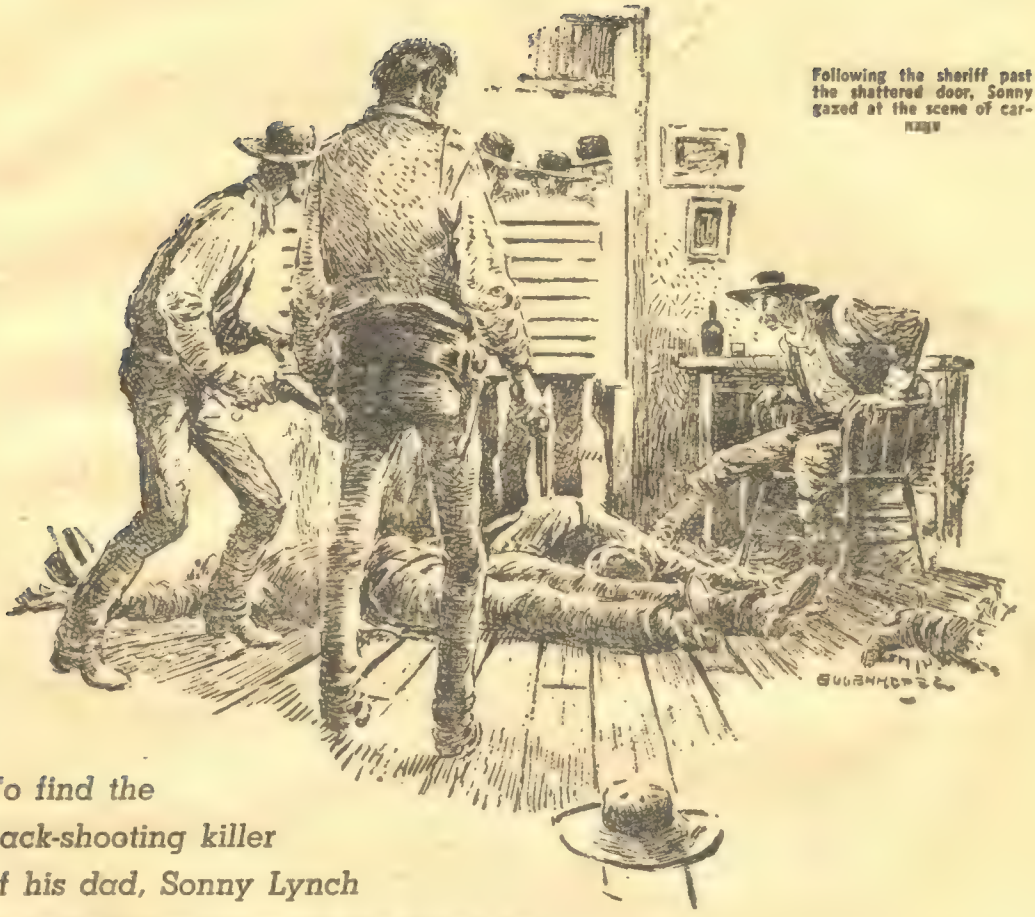
At Barton's request Nancy got Clark's gun out of the holster. She was careful to stand behind him so he could not grab her and try to use her as a shield.

"Take off his hat, Nancy," said Barton.

Nancy snatched the hat off the big man's head. There was a bullet hole in the hat where it was not easily seen, and there was a place where a bullet had left a path in the side of Clark's hair and scalp.

"He must be the man whom Dad wounded around the head," Nancy said.

*(Concluded on page 97)*



Following the sheriff past the shattered door, Sonny gazed at the scene of carnage

*To find the back-shooting killer of his dad, Sonny Lynch searched deep through the West for—*

# THE GUN

HE HELD RIGIDLY to the board front of the Palace Hotel, moving but enough to shed the finger of sun that poked through the weather-riven wooden awning that stretched overhead to the hitching rails. His eyes were fixed on the lank man with the star on his shirt. He was facing this way now. He was starting along the walk of boards that made the north side of Suntrace's main thoroughfare.

Someone walked a horse up, noosed the bridle reins to the rail there and ducked under to come up on the walk. The kid never moved his eyes from the man with the star. The batwings of The Oasis pumped out close to his right arm, then bucked back again. Some men,

By WILLIAM O'SULLIVAN

booted and with guns slung from their hips, banged their heels past him, one of the group hailing him.

"Hey, thar, Sonny!"

Still Sonny Lynch didn't move his eyes from the sheriff. Nor did he acknowledge the greeting. A shadow of annoyance darked his gray eyes briefly, but the eyes kept their attentive study strictly on Sheriff Ralston. And if his eyes moved at all from Long Dan Ralston's heavily-tanned, seamed, mustached face, they didn't go beyond the long, walnut-gripped revolver with the worn silver ring that hung from the center of the gun's butt-plate.

That was a cavalry appendage, that ring. A cavalryman riding through brush country could lose a hand-gun, the holster of which was open for quick use. A cord run through the butt-plate ring and around the cavalryman's waist secured to him an otherwise lost hand-gun. And a lost hand-gun could mean a lost life.

Both sides in the bloody civil carnage that had ended five years ago knew the cord-trick, because both sides had learned their cavalrying when they wore the Blue. Before the shadow that was sectional patriotism had broken away from the Blue to stand alone in Gray outline.

It was a cavalry gun, and thus it was like so many other cavalry guns. But it was what might lie under that plate-ring, impressed in molten metal indelibly, that would make this gun that Long Dan Ralston wore a very special gun to Sonny Lynch there in the Western frontier town of Suntrace.

A GUN, like the one Sheriff Ralston wore so casually, had gone out from South Carolina on a big, laughing, gray-eyed soldier astride a horse at the head of his troop. The man had come back silenced forever. His gun had not been on his body when he had been brought back.

The Blue not long after that had engulfed the Gray, had made the shadow that had stood apart from it a oneness with it again. But throughout the land south of Mason and Dixon's line, there were restless-eyed men who tried to forget things, but who couldn't. A man does what he must, and these men were no different in that respect than the men in Blue who stood all about them.

Some of the ones who couldn't forget went stolidly aboard boats that went steadily southward, to the equator and beyond. Some went with hands tied behind straight backs to stand against a bullet-pocked wall. Some went away from the fire-gutted remnants of a dead life which had once been a beautiful life, and of these probably the most unfortunate were the ones who had been too young to know what the stake was for which the grim game had been played. All that these knew was the loss that was deeded to them from empty saddles.

It was that way with the lank, stubborn-jawed, gray-eyed youth who was Zebediah Lynch when he followed the track of empire westward to St. Louis, on west through Kansas, on sunward to the rutted, boardwalk-edged, frame-buildinged street that was Suntrace.

Sonny Lynch hadn't been at the white-columned plantation house that time his father had come home with his men, skirting the flanks of Sherman's column of wrath in Blue, pecking away at them like angry but futile swallows trying to stay the savage raids of blue jays.

Sonny had been sent to his grandmother's, east in the wild-rice country where military operations were impossible and thus refuge was assured. But he had come home when a slave, old Caesar, made his stealthy way to tell Sonny's grandmother:

"Marse Zeb is done come home. Fo'eber, ma'am. Dat trashy sargint o' his'n done lead him back home on his hoss. Say de Yanks done gunned him when he wouldn't give up. Miz Polly, she pow'ful bad off, ma'am, wit' de fevers. Better come quick!"

They'd come quick, but it wasn't in time. Sonny, thirteen years old that spring, watched with dry, hot eyes as the caskets were lowered into the hastily-dug graves. He had watched and had listened to Sergeant Ruhlon Dakes tell the way of it:

"We come atop a Yank patrol foragin'. Major Lynch, he never had a chance. The Yank patrol leader shot him through the back of the haid and was riflin' the body when we was drove off, ma'am."

"Please, suh, the child," Sonny's grandmother had reproved gently.

"The chile should know things," Sergeant Dakes had said, his buckteeth challenging. "He shouldn't fergit this date, ma'am."

Sonny never would. It was April 13th, in the year 1865. Word was that General Lee had come to terms in Virginia. But Wade Hampton had vowed never to give up, and the action of the die-hards was drifting toward eastern North Carolina.

"His hand-gun," Sonny had reminded Dakes, later. "I want it. It matches the other thing he gave me. The gun was to be mine."

"Catch the Yank and you catch the gun," had been Dakes' blunt reply. "Well, there's things to do, if y'all will excuse me?"

It had been the aged, gray-polled Caesar who had snapped testily, "Ain't nuffin in yo' way, man. So git!"

Three years later, Grandmother Simms had passed away, and the year following, Sonny had gone with hard, straight eyes through the cordons of Blue that ever thinned as he made his way westward.

But the hand-gun with the ring in the butt-plate, and with that unmistakable identifying imprint etched deep into it, was ever in Sonny Lynch's mind. When he'd see a gun like it, it came to his mind, and he would manage to get a close look at the gun. Or when he would be looking at his hands, and his eyes would fall sightlessly on the ring-finger of his left hand, grim remembrance would come into his ordinarily warm gray eyes, turning them cold and ruthless.

Long before he reached Suntrace, he had given up hope of ever finding the gun and the man who had it. Like the burned chimneys of his native land, the gun became a symbol of defeat. The gun was in foreign hands, in foreign and unclean and bloodied hands, and the soul of Sonny Lynch wouldn't rest until it was back in his own hands, its vengeance spoken flatly down the long barrel of it.

A man does what he must, and can, and Sonny had to go on. And he did go on until he came to Suntrace, and there he could not go farther. Not until he found out something about this butt-ringed hand-gun which lanky, clear-eyed, mustached Dan Ralston wore slung to his hip and which, try as he would, Sonny could not get a close look at.

IT WAS when he rode his small cow pony up to the ranchhouse, a new, sprawling structure in this new, sprawling West, and was asking the pert-nosed brunette if any work was to be had there, that Sonny first saw Long Dan and first saw the gun Long Dan wore.

His interest in this fresh-eyed girl died on the instant, and Sonny swung down from his mount to flank the lean rancher who had assumed the duties of sheriff, so he could eye that gun.

It was then that Dan Ralston had moved so that Sonny was never behind that gun's butt-plate. The mustached pioneer allowed, in a slow speech that was twanged with telltale New England brevity, that he could use a likely hand.

"Here, or in Suntrace," Ralston had put it. "Here we have wild cattle. In Suntrace? Well, I don't need to tell you what we have there. Recollect I've seen you around and about in company of the Kinsey boys the last few days."

Sonny had flushed. The Kinsey boys were three brothers and their hangers-on, tight-mouthed, tight-eyed men only somewhat older than the eighteen-year-old Sonny, and to whom he had gavitated for company in a natural way.

The Kinsey boys were said to be homesteaders who were waiting for a pack train to come through with their supplies. They stayed, always some of them, close about the express office which was close to the rich Oasis where hard men left hard money on the trail West.

"That's an unusual gun you got there, ain't it, Sheriff?" Sonny had asked, ignoring the point in Ralston's words. "You had it long?"

"It's been mine five years," the older man said.

"Can I see it?"

Ralston's eyes had sent a silent order to the girl, and Betsy Ralston had faded around to the back of the house. Movement of a calico curtain told Sonny she was again in the house. But he held the sheriff's eyes as he waited for an answer to his request.

"How good are your eyes?" Long Dan had asked, grinning.

"Good as the next," Sonny had drawled. "Better, maybe, when they're looking for something special."

"Well-l." Ralston shrugged slightly, his

hands idly on his hips. He raised his left hand carefully to his ear and worked the lobe gently. "Take a look, then, Sonny."

"For a cavalryman, you're sort of scary, no?" Sonny inquired gently, his eyes level on the man. "What are you scairt of?"

Ralston's blue eyes darkened after their startled widening at Sonny's guess. "I'm afraid of no man," Ralston said with gentle emphasis, "and of no four-legged beast. I calculate you weren't serious about wanting work?"

Sonny thought about it briefly. He had to see the butt-plate of that gun. If he could see even a square piece of it, he could probably tell if it were the one. He moved. So did Ralston. The butt-plate was as far away as ever.

"Mind if I come back?" Sonny asked, then.

Ralston's eyes were gently chiding. "My eyes are good, too, boy," he murmured. "That ring on your hand. On the second finger of your left hand. It wouldn't be a wedding-band?"

Sonny's teeth showed in a smile. He always wore the signet ring turned palm inward, so that only the narrow part of the band showed. That ring and the gun he sought had something in common, and the man who had the gun would know it as soon as he saw the ring.

"It could be," Sonny said noncommittally.

"Then it could be you'd best not come back here to the ranch. You aim to stay about Suntrace?"

"That could be, too."

Ralston nodded a curt end to the talk, but he didn't turn his back, nor did his hands move from his hips. "I'll be looking for you," he said flatly. His eyes were briefly disappointed, and then crystal clear and hard. "Good day to you, sir."

"And to you, suh," Sonny murmured mockingly, with a slight bow. He reached his cayuse and was in the saddle in a lithe vault, his hands staying clear of aid. He kneed the horse about. "You ever see a Reb cavalryman mount, Sheriff?"

Ralston's mouth was grim and his eyes steady. But he spoke no word. Sonny twisted his horse about, then held it with a close bit while he flung a parting challenge over his shoulder:

"More likely you've seen 'em come off a hoss, shot through the back of the haid, eh?" The youth put his horse into movement gracefully.

The gauze-screen door slapped open and shut within Sonny's hearing, and the girl's voice came clear to him.

"Oh, Daddy, isn't he horrid! Who is he?"

Sonny Lynch rode ahead, back straight, easy in the saddle, in the cavalry manner which his father had taught him as a tiny boy. And with the clop-clop of his mount's hooves on the hard-crusted trail something else was beating in Sonny's brain:

"It's the gun! It's the one, all right. It's the gun!"

That Ralston was an ex-Yank cavalry officer, Sonny was as certain of as he was of the seal on his signet ring. And of the seal which was on that butt-plate, but which Ralston was careful not to let anybody see.

HE HAD stayed on in Suntrace, earning his keep by doing chores for pilgrims going through, or in odd jobs about the jerry-built town.

Times when Ralston wasn't about, and there was nothing to do, Sonny mixed with the Kinsey boys, asking casually-put questions.

"That's quite a shooting iron the sheriff packs. Anybody seen it close up?"

The eldest Kinsey had drawn a rough laugh when he'd said, "From the look of Boot Hill, yonder, it appears they have. But no living man has seen it close up. What's between you and Ralston, Brother Lynch? You know him from some place?"

"Might be," Sonny replied cautiously.

"Not butting in," was the studied observation, "but you'll get a better chance for—whatever you are after, if you stay clear of us Kinseys. Maybe you hadn't noticed it, but he sort of watches us close."

"No, I'm blind," Sonny replied, drawing an appreciative chuckle from the six others. "So?"

"So when we are in the Oasis, how's for you staying down at the far end of the bar, whilst we dispose ourselves twixt you and the batwings? Whatever it is you're after, it might be you could work it out."

"The mirror," Sonny offered quickly, flushing at the give-away that he'd given it some thought himself.

The Kinseys grinned, all of them. One

of the younger brothers said, "The Oasis won't give us no work to do. Nor you. The town has us marked, but they don't know what to do about it. Howsoever, a young boy is coming along the trail in two days, and he will get work at the Oasis. Part of that work will be soaping and cleaning the mirror. He'll work it to leave the soap on at the far ends during the dinner period, when things ain't so active."

"And when most Suntracers have their guns slung off," another Kinsey pointed up the picture.

Sonny's eyes questioned them even while his mind accepted the setup.

"Never you mind that, boy," the eldest Kinsey murmured. "We got our ideas, you got yours. It happens they fit in nicely, whatever your game is. Maybe you'll come along with us, later?"

"Maybe I'll have to," Sonny grunted.

There were stories of the James boys having been driven to their grim work by injustices of Reconstruction. The Dalton boys were said to have been respectable, once. Maybe if someone shot a sheriff for reasons of his own, good reasons of his own, during a hold-up, maybe—why, who could say what was the right or wrong of it?

His nod brought an ease in the tension of the Kinsey boys. It was then that Sonny noted for the first time, with surprise, that the hands of the Kinsey boys had been suspiciously close to their gun-butts.

"I'm not careful," he chided himself mentally. "I've got the gun on my mind so that I'm missing other things, important things. I got to be more careful. Like Ralston is careful. Always on guard, Ralston is. I got to be that way, too, or it will be Boot Hill for me."

He winced at the thought of a son of Zebediah Lynch's in a nameless grave in a Boot Hill, thrown in with the contempt reserved for a common killer or outlaw.

"I sure enough got to be more careful," he cautioned himself.

The youngster who had applied for work, and been taken on, at the Oasis, looked familiar to Sonny. Then the why of this occurred to him.

"Looks enough like one of the Kinsey gang—like Red Moffatt—to be his own younger brother," he mused.

The youngster did his chores, and as noon approached, Sonny, leaning stiffly against the board front of the adjoining Palace Hotel, could hear the voice of Cuddy Latrobe, the bartender, arguing with the boy.

"Listen, Charlie, you got to get them end-sections of the mirror done afore dinner time. You hear? And do 'em careful, now. Don't lean too hard against 'em, or you'll go right through into Steve Morrow's quarters."

"Aw, nobody eats midday meals here," the youngster laughed. "Say, I'm getting hungry, too! The main part is clean, so I'll just leave the sections to wait! Look! Look at them spittoons shine! Huh?"

"Shiftless young folks we're getting nowadays," the bartender mourned. "Won't even take orders. And how is it you know so much about this place if you've never been here before? How do you know nobody much eats noonday dinner here?"

The youngster laughed. "The food smells," he came back, quick as a wink. "Smell it?"

Sonny's breathing came easier with the bartender's laugh at the sally. Across the rutted road, the Kinsey boys lounged along the rail by the hardware store. Abruptly, as Sonny watched, things started to change along the street.

Men moved from where they were to the big and popular dining room of the hotel. Two of the Kinsey bunch separated from the other four and drifted down to lounge outside the express office.

Then Sonny saw the tall form of Sheriff Ralston emerge from the livery and start slowly up the boardwalk, pausing to talk to one and another of the townsmen, but all the while his eyes busy with everything and nothing beyond the shoulders of his listeners.

He came along some more, paused again, and swung almost sideways to Sonny, but too far away for Sonny to see the butt-plate of the gun clearly. A few men came out through the Oasis' batwings and banged their booted heels along the walk. One of them called pleasantly, "Hey, thar, Sonny!"

Sonny Lynch's jaw muscles were working spasmodically, as if he was trying to swallow something he didn't like. But a man did what he had to, and could.

The four Kinsey boys who had stayed across the road by the hardware store now slid under the hitching rail and made their way over, escorted by Sheriff Ralston's eyes. The Kinseys went in through the batwings. Ralston came along unhurriedly, hands easy at his sides, a small smile on his lips. He veered to the outside as he breasted Sonny laughing a gentle greeting to a cowpoke.

Sonny's heart leaped when he saw the sheriff would have to turn a flank toward him to let the cowboy pass, but it fell again when the sheriff made his flanking movement in a small wheel to his own right. Ralston took the cowhand along to the batwings with him, speaking casually, his eyes drifting over Sonny without apparent recognition and yet leaving Sonny with the sensation he had been tabbed in every physical respect.

Ralston stepped through the batwings then, and the cowboy waved a parting salute and came past Sonny, his dark eyes sharp on the lank youth who was watching after the sheriff. Sonny pushed past the man, aware that the cowpoke had stopped, was watching after him. But he saw the man's shadow motionless where a split in the overhead awning fixed it, and as he pushed into the saloon he twisted his head and could see the thin noonday shadow of the man through the window, and the man still hadn't moved back toward the Oasis.

Ralston was just inside the batwings, standing by a table and drinking from a water glass, but with eyes that marked everything in the room. He frosted Sonny with a swift, businesslike appraisal, nodded curtly, and sipped his water again, the glass held in his left hand.

The Kinsey boys were standing in front of one soap-opaqued end of the three-section mirror, close to the door. Sonny felt a grim humor work in him when he realized that the very thing the Kinseys had done to thwart Ralston's keeping them all constantly under his gaze was now keeping the Kinseys from being able to watch Ralston.

Sonny moved down the bar instead of joining the others. He snapped a look in the clear center-mirror as he went and saw the attention intensify in Ralston's gaze at this unexpected move. Then one of the Kinseys turned from the group at the bar and made his way out the batwings again.

Ralston was flanked.

WATCHING from his vantage point at the far end, Sonny could almost imagine a horse under the former cavalryman when the sheriff pulled forward to thwart the flanking play. Straight to the center of the bar the sheriff came, putting his hands onto the rounded top-rail and speaking gently to Cuddy Latrobe who had frozen into position behind the mahogany.

Then suddenly, in a sliding sidestep, Ralston was sidling swiftly along the bar. Toward Sonny Lynch. Sonny's heart jumped when he realized Ralston couldn't hide that butt-plate now. But so swiftly did Ralston move that he had closed completely on the youth before Sonny could get the look he had waited so long for.

Sonny grinned tightly when he realized he was about to disarm Ralston for his look-see at that gun. His youthful and speedy reflexes would give him the upper-hand in the draw. The Kinseys, at the far end, were eyeing the tableau attentively, were even now moving apart to open up the target their group made.

Ralston's eyes were turned toward the Kinseys when Sonny was starting his move. He held it, though. Ralston's left hand had moved to the lobe of his ear, drawing Sonny's attention briefly. Then it was Dan Ralston's voice that continued to hold Sonny.

"Stand easy, man. Just stand easy." Ralston spoke softly and through unmoving lips as he held his face toward the Kinseys, and Sonny could see the profile of his gentle smile even through the shock of it. "Just like you are, boy, and now—start moving back. Around the end of the bar and to the door. Don't stop, or my finger will start working, boy. Get going! Get going!"

Through the shock of seeing the man's gun, *the* gun he'd been seeking for so long, somehow out of its holster and poking into his own flat midriff, Sonny knew the despair of failure. But even through the shock of it, he moved, because a man does what he must or can, and Sonny couldn't do other than move. Ralston's body blocked view of his drawn gun.

The Kinseys were eyeing the change

with puzzled concern. It brought their movements to a halt. Ralston's voice came to Sonny again, thinly.

"Tell them you want to talk to me a minute, in the small back room here, boy. Tell them!"

Sonny was surprised at the casualness of his own voice in the full surrender of it. "Boys," he said. "I want to see the sheriff a minute. I won't be long."

The Kinseys were grinning suddenly, then. Sonny saw it fitted right in with their plan of things. Once the door closed on the sheriff, Ralston would never come out of that room again. Not and stay alive, he wouldn't.

Sonny turned, worked the knob of the door, and Ralston followed in after him, shutting the door behind him with a bang.

"Your gun, Lynch. No! I'll get it. Just you turn your back, and get those hands high. Hold them there. I calculate you know I mean it, Sonny?"

Sonny complied wordlessly. Ralston secured his gun, frisked him expertly but futilely for a hidden weapon, and said, "Just you stay in here, Sonny. I'm going back into the bar."

Sonny held his peace until Ralston's hand was on the knob, was turning it, was shoving the door open. Then he spoke, his voice brittle with resignation.

"Don't do it, Sheriff. Don't go out there! You hear me, don't go out there!"

Ralston held it, his head twisted sidewise, his hand still on the knob. "Why, Sonny?"

"I—I don't know, Sheriff. I think maybe the Kinseys—look, suh, just plain don't go out there."

Ralston smiled slightly, his face coming around to Sonny's. "That's all I wanted to know, boy," he said softly. "I don't know what you're after with me. I had to find out. I had to take this way of doing it. I couldn't believe—well—"

"Your gun," Sonny murmured. "The gun I been looking for, I think. I had to see it, close up. I had to, Sheriff. But—but I haven't yet."

Ralston chuckled, but his eyes were grim with the knowledge of what was waiting outside. "You're an odd one," he said quietly. "I'd like to know, later, what you're about. But so far as the gun is concerned—take it, Sonny. For now, anyway. I'll use the one I took from you. Here."

IT CAME to Sonny later that, now that he had the all-important gun, now that his quest was ended, he checked it only to see that it was loaded and ready for its rim-fire action. Not so much as a glance did he give the butt-plate for that telltale of identification.

"Let me go talk with them, Sheriff," he said, trying to push past the lean ex-cavalryman. "Let me tell them I'm out of this. Not that I was ever in it, really. I mean—well, my aim was only to get my hands on this gun."

Ralston nodded, his eyes easier. "You sure you don't want to go out and lay into them, so they can't talk later, maybe? You sure that isn't it, and not just that you want to protect me? Or to make up for letting them whipsaw me by use of you?"

"That your idea, suh?" Sonny asked.

Ralston laughed, and then his eyes were on his business. He reached his Stetson off his head, gentled his foot against the latch-free door, and then kicked the door outward, sailing his hat slowly into the barroom.

A deafening roar of guns crashed, and the sailing hat bucked and spun to the floor with a dozen holes through it. Other gunfire thundered, as if the very room Sonny and Ralston were in was firing from its walls, so close was the roar of this following salvo.

A man cursed feelingly in the shocked silence that followed, and a body hit the floor, and another. Outside, three shots slapped flatly in the open air, and the voice of someone cried, "Don't shoot, don't shoot, I give up!"

Inquiring voices raised to a hubbub of sound, boots pounded along the boardwalk, and Ralston shoved past the shattered door into the bar. Sonny, his eyes wide and his mouth agape, followed after him.

Cuddy was just coming up from behind the bar. His frightened eyes speared on Sonny, and he shouted, "Hey, there's another one of them, and he still has his gun!"

Ralston stepped back to shield Sonny. "Shut up, Cuddy, you fool!" he snapped. He eyed the growing crowd in the bat-

wings who were alternately looking from the three slug-torn bodies on the floor to the cowering survivor of the Kinsey boys who was collapsed in a chair, his back to Ralston. "I couldn't have worked this thing without Sonny, here, to help me. Eh, Sonny?"

But Sonny only half heard. Sonny was staring at the blank spaces at either end of the center-section of the mirror where the glass panels had opened back on unsuspected—by Sonny and by most of the others in Suntrace—hinges.

Hard-eyed, calm-faced citizens of the town were standing there reloading guns, talking with quiet satisfaction about the way it had all worked out.

"Yeah. Smart idea, that," Ralston said. "Steve Morrow thought it up so he could watch everything in his Oasis from his living quarters in the back there. He's got peepholes worked into the mirror. With the ends soaped over, it was easy to hide a gang of men in there to keep an eye on this ornery bunch of ringtails."

Sonny nodded, remembering Cuddy's warning to the youngster: " 'Don't lean too hard while you clean them end-sections, or you'll fall clear into Steve Morrow's quarters.' "

"Funny what there can be around you, and you never realize it," Ralston said, as he watched the Doc examine the bodies.

That reminded Sonny. He lifted the ring on the butt-plate and looked. He blinked. Nothing. Just nothing. Just an ordinary butt-plate. He shook his head dazedly. He looked up to meet Ralston's gaze on him in question.

"It isn't the gun I was looking for," he said. "The particular gun I mean should have a mark like this. Like the monogram on my ring. See? A lynx head. The family crest of the Lynch Family. Dad took his butt-plate off, heated it soft to take the imprint of this signet ring of his that I'm wearing.

"He—he had the gun when a Yank officer of cavalry shot him through the back of the head, there at the end of it all," Sonny went on quietly. "His sergeant told us, when he brought him back to us. Back in Carolina. Old Caesar, one of Dad's slaves, suspected the sergeant who was found dead later, pillaging in a Yank uniform. But he didn't have the gun. He did have Dad's stem-winder, though."

RALSTON nodded. "A common hand-gun," he said. "Army issue. I got mine when I came out of the army five years ago. Never was in South Carolina, however, I'm sorry to say. Didn't even do any Reconstruction duty, I'm happy to say. Not that the others could help it. A soldier is a soldier, and he obeys orders."

"Dad always said that," Sonny nodded, his eyes clearer than they had been in a long time, and his heart singing as it never had in ten years. "I wish I had his gun with the lynx head on it, though. Gee, Sheriff, that was a good gun, my Dad's gun!"

Ralston grinned. "A gun is good only when it is in a good hand," he said. "Reckon that butt-plate can be heated and imprinted just like the other one was. You aim to use it here in town helping me as my deputy? Or you think it'll work best riding range for me out home?"

Sonny said sheepishly, "Gee, Sheriff! I mean, after the way I stalked you, watching you all the time—"

Ralston winked. "My Betsy sort of evened things up by watching you whilst you were watching me. And she's a smart little gal. But you were so all-fired riled you haven't noticed her. I told her to let you be, that you wore a marriage ring. But she allowed you weren't married." He grinned. " 'Not yet,' is the way she put it. Well, let's clean this mess up and get you your deputy badge and get on out home for supper."

"I—I can't," Sonny said, his face flushed. "I mean, the way I acted, everyone figured I was in with the Kinseys. Some do yet, as a matter of fact."

Ralston raised his left hand to tug at an ear lobe, and Sonny's grin grew with the hands he thrust skyward. "That's a neat trick," he chuckled. "I watch your left hand, and the right works. Don't shoot, I'll come quietly, suh."

Ralston winked.

"Damyankee trick," he murmured. "But we needed tricks, what with the horsemen you Rebs were!"

"Hey, thar, Sonny!" someone greeted from the crowd, as they went along.

"Hi, pardner!" Sonny answered in kind.

## THE FRONTIER POST

*(Continued from page 9)*

staple cotton would flourish in rich Gila and Salt River Valleys. Now Arizona grows more and better cotton than the "cotton belt" of the deep South.

The geography of Arizona is such that it is a land of little rain. Consequently, water has always been a problem, and that problem has grown more serious with the growth in population. Flowing past Arizona's western boundary is the mighty Colorado. Very little of it is diverted onto Arizona soil. Arizona claims that California hornswoggled her out of her just share of Colorado River rights. She's got a big scrap on in Washington to get more water and power from the Colorado River. It's a pretty complicated situation that involves water rights clean up along the Colorado watershed, into Wyoming. But California and Arizona are the main opponents in the battle royal.

### Maybe Steve Was Right

The ghost of Esteban, the discoverer of Arizona, hasn't been seen around, that I know of. But he could see plenty to make a return visit interesting. The shining cities of Tucson and Phoenix stand along the route he travelled to find the fabled Seven Cities. They are not roofed with gold, but they are flanked by valuable groves of golden citrus fruit and herds of fat cattle and tourists, so maybe Steve was right in sending back that come-on cross to Fray Marcos, after all.

Now you gals and galluses have a painless history of Arizona, which is the way all history should be, once you get the hang of it!

—CAPTAIN STARR.

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## OUR NEXT ISSUE

THE RED is a mighty shifty river, and was particularly so in the past. Many a poor waddy was sucked into its maw, trying to help his trail boss get a recalcitrant herd across. It's the southernmost of the Mississippi's big tributaries and nearly 1200 miles long. It rises in the upper part of the Staked Plains and discharges, in Louisiana, partly into the Mississippi and partly into the Atchafalaya. Its pinkish-red color, from

[*Turn page*]

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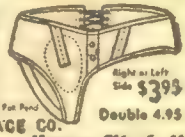

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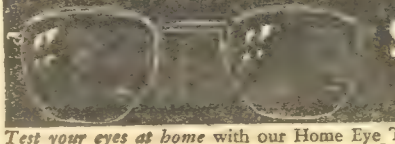

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whence its gets name, comes from the suspended silt the river carries off.

As unpredictable as the Old West it flowed through, the channel of the river varied with the amount of water it carried off. In 1828 the Red brought down so many forest trees that it jammed itself up around Shreveport, Louisiana.

The dam it made was ninety miles long and the United States government had to go to work on it. They called it the "Red River Raft" and it took years to clean it up. The Red pulled the same trick again during the Civil War and another raft, built by the current, had to be cleared away. Also, during the War, in March and April of 1864, Major General Nathaniel P. Banks led a combined military and naval expedition up the river in an attempt to open a Federal highway to Texas, but the vanguard of his army was repulsed with heavy loss at Sabine Cross-Roads by the Confederates under Lieutenant General Richard Taylor and the expedition was abandoned.

As settlers moved their way upriver, many of them debarked at various places along its mighty course, to set up homesteads. In the earlier days they pulled up to the Texas shore, for north of the river was Indian Territory, and the famous Cherokee Strip had not yet been opened to public domain. Naturally, some of the towns founded made for a permanency that has lasted until today. Others were fly-by-night, with sharp land operators getting what they could out of land sites and then taking off with their ill-gotten gains.

It's a situation similar to this that brings Ranger Jim Hatfield to the Red River country of Texas-Oklahoma in next month's issue of TEXAS RANGERS magazine. Jim had been in this country before, but not at the particular spot where the action takes place. But when you finish the last line of crack Western writer Jackson Cole's THE SKELETON RIDERS, you'll feel that you have actually lived in a boom town, riding with the law, and were in on the climax when those beyond the law tried to step back in to clean up millions in illegal gain.

It all starts off when a solid citizen of Sherman, Texas, about fourteen miles from the Red River, is shot dead in a brazen outburst of crime by a band called the Skeleton Riders and headed by a stringy, vicious individual called the "Wasp." Seemingly, there's no excuse for this cold-blooded murder—until a few days later, a letter reaches Captain Bill McDowell, chief of the Texas Rangers, in Austin. Age had taken its toll somewhat from the tough old captain, but his mind was still brilliant and capable of coping with the shrewd, devious machinations of super outlaws. But his right bower, his strength in his old age, was his favorite ranger, Jim Hatfield.

On receipt of the letter, from the city marshal of Sherman, McDowell called in Hatfield to read an enclosure that had accompanied it. It was a note that had been evidently dropped by mistake near the body of the man murdered in Sherman. Hatfield's grave eyes scanned the writing, and read:

"Dispose at once of the following: Abel Pyne, who lives in the square white house on North Main, Lucius Evans, owner of the Box E north of Sherman, George Welder of the 1-2, and Duncan Kilgore, Slash K. By now you must have organized according to my instructions. I want disciplined men, and the methods I ordered are best. Make no errors. This is vital. Will join you . . ." There was neither salutation nor signature.

Hatfield approached the problem in his usual manner. He didn't spend time mulling over it, but got to the scene of action as soon as he could, hoping by being on the ground quickly he could gain valuable information that would lead him to the crooks and an explanation as to what was behind their murderous activities.

Sherman was a fast-growing town, particularly since John Butterfield had been persuaded to route the St. Louis-to-San Francisco stage line through the city. As Hatfield realized, after stabling his famous horse Goldy, somewhere within this sprawling town site was the man or men he was looking for.

With the aid of young Buck Robertson, whom he had taken along, Jim soon learned that the Skeleton Riders were led by one Tourneau, a wanted crook known as the Wasp. But when Professor Leming Brite comes on the scene, and is obviously the head of the outfit rodded by Tourneau, Hatfield figures that there must be more to the plot than just the gunning out of the ranchers named in the note he'd read in McDowell's office.

But the answer to that would come later. At the moment, Hatfield had to warn the ranchers and give aid when they and their loved ones would be attacked by the Skele-

ton Riders, whose badge of office was a grisly skeleton mask covering the face. As usual, Jim went to the heart of the matter. Learning that the Skeleton Rider gang holed up across the Red River in Indian Territory, he ferried over and posing as a renegade horse thief, managed to join the gang. It was certainly a bunch of tough hombres he now associated with, and from their conversation it was obvious that the immediate move of the Riders was to wipe out, if possible, the ranchers named in the note. But why? Certainly outward evidence of their deaths wouldn't give Professor Brite a hold on anything, or anybody—at least, as far as Hatfield could figure. But time and future action brought the explanation to Jim—an explanation that was as astonishing as the murderous fighting that came in its wake.

In the next issue of TEXAS RANGERS, you'll find the amazing climax to the nefarious depredations of the Skeleton Riders and the gang boss, Professor Brite, a smooth operator from New Orleans. What the professor had planned on a scale so gigantic as to make for unbelief will be told in startling detail. Look forward to THE SKELETON RIDERS. It's a humdinger from start to finish.

Our old friend Long Sam Littlejohn will be with us again in the next issue, too. In LONG SAM RIDES SOUTH, author Lee Bond takes our gaunt, lanky hero to a part of Texas he'd once been in before. Even old Sleeper, his ugly old roan gelding, seemed to remember the Rail M range of old Jim Morgan's. But what Long Sam was thinking as he rode up was forgotten in the fact that he had to rescue a man from drowning in a well! And he'd hardly shaken off the water when he found himself mixed up in a will case. If it wasn't one thing, it was another—in the latter case, U. S. Deputy Marshal Joe Fry. But Long Sam always manages to take things in their stride, even to bullets. Ride south with Long Sam in the next issue of this magazine.

Beside the Jim Hatfield novel and the Long

[*Turn page*]

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Sam yarn, TEXAS RANGERS will carry its dependable quota of nerve-thrilling short stories and interesting fact articles of the Old West. For real reading pleasure, be on hand next month!

## OUR MAIL BAG

HOWDY, all you letter and postcard writers! We sure like to hear from each and every one of you, and the more mail the better. If you can take the time to write the editor, you may be certain that we can find the time to read what you think of TEXAS RANGERS and the stories and articles published in the magazine. You dish it out—we can take it. Tell us anything you want to about the magazine, good or bad. Tells us what you'd like to see in it other than what it carries now. Any suggestions on your part will certainly be taken into consideration.

Now, a few bits of correspondence from you good readers:

I like the Jim Hatfield stories better than any I have read in any other book. He is a Lone Wolf, all right! Why can't he get married and have something more in life than trying to get killed all the time? Why not put a little fireside in the story for once, and maybe a child or two, so he can have some one to take his place when he is dead? When I read a Jim Hatfield story I feel that it is more like a real-life story than anything I know.—*Mrs. J. A. H. Sauve, Kirkland Lake, Ontario, Canada.*

For several years I've read *Texas Rangers* and I still enjoy it as I did before. Of course, everyone to his own taste. This is America and everyone has freedom of speech. No matter how the stories go they will always be tops on my list. Keep up the good work, Mr. Cole, and you'll always have readers out in this neck of the woods.—*Addellery Baxter, Jackson, Tenn.*

Five years ago I got hold of my first copy of *Texas Rangers* and haven't missed an issue since. Of course, my favorite is Jim Hatfield, of the Rangers. It takes me back to my boyhood on a farm in southeast Kansas. My uncle was a Ranger for twenty-two years, and when he came up to visit us, once a year, he would tell me many a hair-raising story of his fights with outlaws. He was badly wounded in his last year of service by an outlaw bullet and retired to his


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farm in Missouri, where he died a few years later.—*C. R. Birch, Denver, Colorado.*

Have been reading your magazine for many years now and thought I would sling you a line. I think that Jim Hatfield is terrific and he really makes your magazine a great one.—*Edward Johnson, Arborg, Manitoba, Canada.*

I read your magazine every time I can get one and like it very much. Please put more romance in your stories. And how come Jim Hatfield never gets wounded seriously? I think you should have a Pen Pal page.—*Mary Mullen, St. James, Missouri.*

I read *Texas Rangers* magazine and I think Jim Hatfield's is a wonderful story. Keep him going! But would you please make the Long Sam Littlejohn one a longer story? Keep up the good work.—*W. C. Clark, Cape May, New Jersey.*

I have been reading *Texas Rangers* for some time. I think Jim Hatfield and Long Sam Littlejohn are tops, but I liked Doc Swap the best. When you quit printing him he seemed like an old friend gone. Please re-issue Doc Swap.—*Nancy Victoria Anderson, Shawsville, Virginia.*

We're sorry, but that's about all the space we have this time for correspondence from readers. We'd like to print all the mail that crosses this desk, but you can readily see that would be impossible. But we do want to hear from you, loud and long. So please address your mail to TEXAS RANGERS, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, New York. That's all, folks—*adios*, and many thanks for being with us.

—THE EDITOR.

## NO PLACE FOR STRANGERS

*(Concluded from page 84)*

"Suppose I had believed him and refused to believe you, Sheriff?"

"Shucks, most women believe me," said Sheriff Tom Barton. "Why, when I tell my wife I met a very pretty girl at the Flying W ranch, she won't doubt it for a moment." He smiled. "You reckon you could get some of your men to take care of this hombre until he is turned over to the sheriff of this county, Miss Wilson."

"Of course," said Nancy. "The boys are sleeping out in the bunkhouse. I'll get them." She moved to the door and then glanced back. "Your wife is a very lucky woman, Sheriff."

"Now that," said Barton, "is something she doesn't believe!" He smiled. "Anymore than I believed Clark's story of the bank robbery that never happened."

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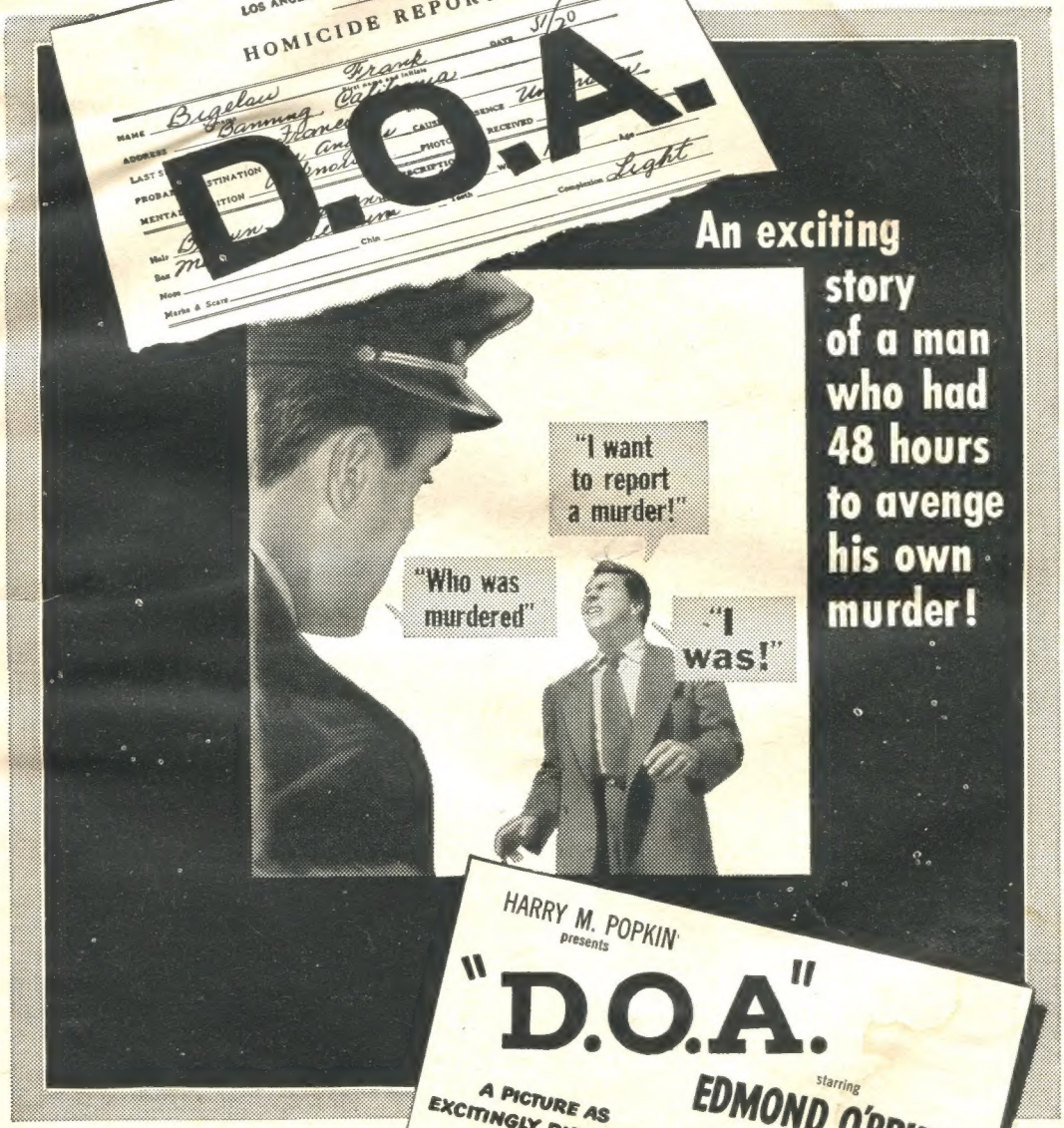
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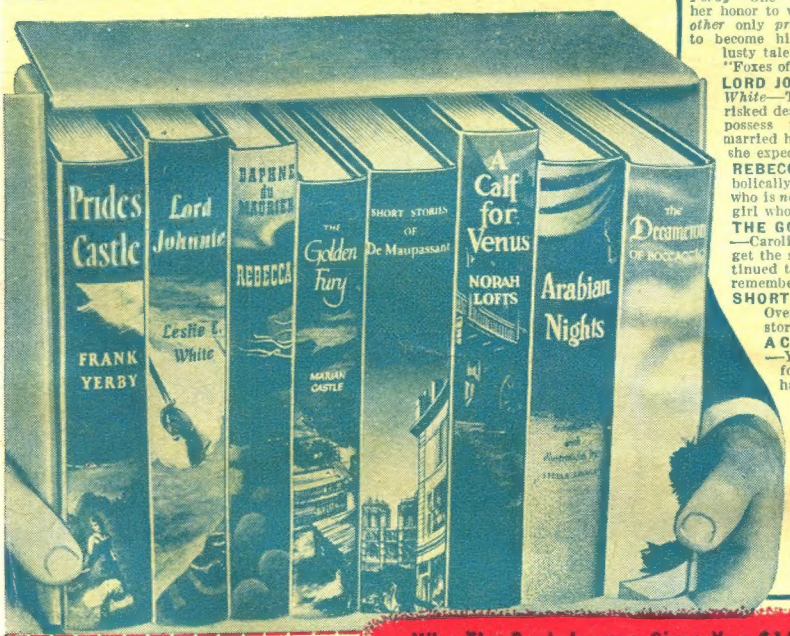


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